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TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE



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SO THERE I WAS, at what has to be the biggest book fair in the world. I mean, sixteen halls full of books. And each hall has oh, I dunno, literally loads of book

publishers all pushing their wares. There are over 8000 of them with displays at the Frankfurt book show, yes, eight thousand! That's publishers from a hundred different countries! You've never seen so many books. Some of them are even in English!

'So, how many fantasy or science fiction publishers are there?' I hear you ask. Let me consult my nifty CD-Rom show guide. Mmm, well, it would seem that there are somewhere around 300. Hold on, that's less than 5% of the publishers there! Shurley shum mishtake?

No, it's true, a very sad statistic. It's made even worse by the fact that a good few of those claiming membership of the science fiction or fantasy ranks really belong in the 'Handsome prince bonding with noble dragon in nice fairytale world' category, whilst loads of others don't even get out of the 'Binky the Wandering Troll pop-up book' sector. What is left seems largely to be based on 'Now a multi-billion dollar blockbuster starring Arnie Stalleger or Bruce Wallone', or

maybe the 'Fifteenth book in the Galgorian Cycles of Praan, by renowned hack Gerry Bilge' or some such. I have to admit that at least I didn't come across anything that declared on its cover that it was 'comparable to Tolkien at his best', but all the same, it was a little disheartening.

Have you ever tried walking onto the lush carpeting of an international book publisher's squillion dollar trade stand and asked for 'Anything with axe wielding, soul eating good guys in it?', or 'Something which is unashamedly action-packed gritty violence from cover to cover. With chainsaws. Can you help?' Don't bother! All you'll get is funny looks, I can tell you.

SO WHERE DOES that leave us? Well, by my reckoning it means that we here at your favourite fiction magazine get to clean up. I mean, if no one else is even interested in mayhem, carnage, bloodshed and general rip-roaring planetary destructive action, then that means that only *Inferno!* will do. Where else can you get your regular fix of screaming death?

And now you don't even have to wear out your boots walking miles around Frankfurt to find *Inferno!* In fact, you don't even have to visit your local newsagent if you really can't be bothered, especially if it's raining outside (again). No, it's all a great deal easier than that. Cause guess what? As of now, you can just turn to page 66 and subscribe!

Andy Jones
Editor

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The Black Library, Games
Workshop Ltd.,
Willow Road, Lenton,
Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK
or email us at
publishing@games-
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PUBLICATION

EDITORS

Andy Jones

Marc Gascoigne

WRITERS

Dan Abnett

Bill King

David Pugh

Gordon Rennie

Neil Rutledge

ARTISTS

Ralph Horsley

Karl Kopinski

Kenson Low

David Pugh

Jeff Waye

PRODUCTION

Warwick Kinrade

Ian Pickstock

ADMINISTRATION

Lesley Johnson

COVER

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by Kenson Low

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The Affair of the Araby Exhibit

Being an ACCOUNT of the
investigations of Zavant Konniger,
gentleman *sage* of ALTDORF, as
faithfully recounted by his humble
servant and scribe, HERR Gordon
Rennie.

ZAVANT KONNIGER. I have urgent business with Zavant Konniger. Inform your master that I wish to see him immediately!

Vido the Halfling stepped back hurriedly as the silk-robed priest swept uninvited into the hallway, trailing tendrils of cold Altdorf river mist in his wake. It was late – from outside, Vido could hear a lone night-watchman calling the midnight hour – but unexpected visitors were not a rarity at the home of Zavant Konniger, Altdorf's famous resident sage and mystic.

Still, in all his years of service, Vido could not remember an emissary of the Grand Theogonist ever come calling. Noticing the visitor's obvious ill-ease, Vido barely suppressed a gleeful smirk. Matters must be serious indeed, if the Cult of Sigmar had need to call upon the services of one of their most troublesome intellectual adversaries!

Vido bowed extravagantly, playing out the scene for all he was worth. 'And your name, sir? How would you wish yourself announced to Herr Konniger?'

'Scribe-Magister von Heltz of the Church Archives,' the impatient priest snapped. 'And be quick about it, Halfling. I am here on urgent Church business.'

Leaving the priest alone in the hallway, Vido climbed the stairs towards his master's study, smiling to himself. The only decoration back in the hallway was a particularly lewd Tilean pastoral landscape scene of satyrs and nymphs at play, and the haughty priest couldn't help but notice it. The master had placed it there specifically to throw visitors off their guard, and Vido could only imagine the servant of Sigmar's discomfort at being confronted with such a blatant display of typical Tilean decadence.

Vido knocked respectfully on the dark wood of the heavy study door, knowing that the inhabitant within would have already heard his footfalls on the stairs. In his time, the Halfling had been one of the most light-footed cutpurses in the business, but he knew that very little escaped the notice of his master.

'Enter!' came the reply from within. Vido opened the door nervously, aware that his master disliked being disturbed at such a late hour. The sage spent most evenings in his study, pouring over his research and compiling what he had often claimed would be his life's work. 'Chaos Theory,' Konniger called it. An academic examination and exploration of the many manifestations of the dread Powers of Chaos.

'A lot of nasty stuff best left well alone,' was what Vido called it and he still shuddered whenever he recalled the illustrations of some of the books that Konniger would forgetfully leave lying open on his desk. Still, Vido consoled himself, if the master was working then at least that meant he probably hadn't been adding that damned powder of his into his pipe again...

Even to the Halfling's inhuman eyes, the study was dimly lit, and he wondered

how the master could work in such conditions. The figure behind the desk looked up, the light from the single candle in the room reflecting a dull red glow in his eyes.

The pipe, thought Vido. The old devil's definitely been at the pipe again. He'll bring the Witch Hunters down upon us one day, and no excuses about intellectual ennui and consciousness expansion will save either of us from the stake.

'Yes?' enquired the voice of Zavant Konniger, as dry and dusty as the ancient worm-eaten volumes piled up on the desk in front of him.

'A visitor, master. A Herr von Heltz from the Church Archives. He demands an urgent audience with you.' Konniger's eyebrows rose in question, and Vido knew his words had achieved their desired effect. After so many years in the service of the legendary Zavant Konniger, it was a selfish pleasure to have at least once caught the great sage by surprise. 'We are honoured indeed, to receive such august company. Tell me, Vido: what are your impressions of our mysterious midnight caller?'

Vido hesitated, pudgy hands clasping and unclasping, feeling the expectant gaze of his master boring into him. Deduction and observation are the greatest tools we possess, Konniger had so often tried to teach him. All the facts are there to be deduced, if only your eyes and wits are sharp enough to catch them. His master was, as ever, testing him. Vido may have been a one-time alley thief and son of a lowly brewer from the Moot, but he had picked up a trick or two in his time with the famous sage-detective of Altdorf.

'He's a priest of Sigmar, all right, although I'd wager my old dad's horse and cart that he's never preached a sermon in his life. Too young to have properly earned that scholarly rank of his by any honest means, and he's no warrior-priest neither. Those hands are too soft to have ever swung a warhammer in battle. Von Heltz is a nob's name. Most likely he's the youngest idiot son of minor Empire aristocracy, sidelined into a career

in the Church where his family hoped he could do the least amount of harm.'

Zavant smiled, nodding in satisfaction. 'Exactly! A messenger boy, sent by his superiors to beg for help from that infamous old heretic Konniger. Show him in, Vido. Let the messenger boy be brought before us!'

Vido grinned. Oh yes, the master was going to enjoy this night's adventure...

Vido scurried off and returned with the priest. The Halfling manservant had played out this piece of theatre countless times before with his master, but Vido had to admit that for anyone encountering Konniger for the first time, the great sage-detective made a powerful first impression.

He sat behind his desk, not yet deigning to notice their presence. He was a tall man, with a wiry physique that hinted at a life that had included a great deal more than scholarly pursuits and bookworm academia. Although he had never dared ask, Vido guessed his master to be somewhere in his late middle years. (Vido himself was almost twice as old but somehow always managed to feel very much the junior member of their partnership.)

Konniger's hair, grey and thinning, was tied back in a style favoured more by Norse barbarians than one-time Professors Emeritus of Altdorf University, and the sage's impressively cerebral forehead and great beak of a nose often reminded his companion of the Elf warhawks in the aviary of the Imperial Zoo. And then, of course, there were the eyes. They blazed with a fierce intelligence, seeming to strip away all irrelevancies in their constant search for truth.

Vido coughed politely and Konniger raised his eyes on cue, seeming to notice them for the first time. 'Ah, my dear Magister von Heltz. So sorry to keep you waiting, but I was distracted by a most embarrassing lapse of memory while compiling my current treatise on the reign of Magnus the Pious. Of course, as a librarian of the Church Archives, I'm sure you could furnish me with the right

answer. Magnus's famous Declaration of Nuln... was it issued in 2306 or 2307?

'What? Well, yes... I- I think that would be right,' the priest stammered, clearly not having a clue what the sage was talking about.

Behind him, Vido stared intently at the cuticles of his hairy and horn-nailed toes, not daring to look up in case he burst out laughing at the awkward expression on the priest's face. His master did enjoy his little games of intellectual one-upmanship, especially with his former brethren of the Church of Sigmar.

'Of course! How could I have been so forgetful!' Konniger smiled, pretending to scratch a correction on the manuscript in front of him. 'Where would we be without the learned wisdom of the keepers of the Holy Archives? No doubt we could chatter on like this all night about the Blessed Magnus, but my servant tells me you are here on urgent and official business.'

At the mention of his mission, von Heltz regained some of his former aristocratic composure. He allowed his robes to fall open, revealing the chain of office round his neck. He casually toyed with it while he spoke, making sure that the gold warhammer sigil gleamed in the reflected candlelight. 'Indeed, yes, Herr Konniger. I regret to say that there has been an... incident... tonight at the Church Archives. The Chief-Archivist himself has sent me to summon your assistance-'

Konniger lent forward suddenly in his chair and raised his hand for silence, abruptly cutting off the priest. 'An incident?' he inquired sharply. 'What kind of incident?'

Von Heltz hesitated, afraid to give away more than he intended under the stern gaze of the mighty sage. 'A break-in at the Archives and the suspected theft of items from the Araby Collection.'

Vido noticed a subtle change in Konniger's expression, and knew that his master's recent request to view the same collection of Araby artefacts had been summarily turned down by the Chief-Archivist. Still, Konniger said nothing and allowed von Heltz to continue.

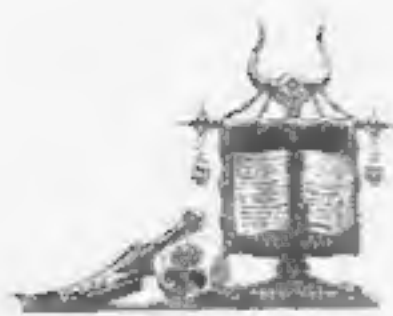
'Several deaths are also involved. As a loyal servant of Sigmar and former member of the priesthood, it is hoped that you would wish to do everything in your power to aid the Church. His Eminence the Chief-Archivist has also made it known that in return for your help, certain of the more, um, restricted tomes within his care would be made available to you for research purposes. Naturally, the Church would appreciate your well-known reputation for tact and a swift resolution in dealing with such delicate matters.'

Oh yes, thought Vido. It wouldn't do for word to leak out about how the Church had lost one of the treasures of the Bretonnian Crusades. Especially since they were a goodwill gift to mark the recently-renewed alliance between Emperor Karl Franz and King Louen Leoncouer. Still, he had to admit that they had used the right bait. If there was one thing that would capture Konniger's attention it was old books and their nasty contents.

Konniger was already on his feet and heading out the door. He reached out without looking to grasp the cloak that he knew Vido would be holding out ready for him. 'Say no more, my dear von Heltz. As a faithful servant of Sigmar, I am yours to command! I assume you have a carriage waiting. You can brief me on the rest of the details on the way to the archives.'

Vido sighed to himself as he struggled to keep up with his master's long-legged stride down the stairs. He'd been looking forward to the late supper of beef and ale hotpot that was still waiting for him in the kitchen, and now he was on his way out in the middle of the night to who-knows-where, with Sigmar-knows-what waiting for them when they got there.

I should have listened to my old dad, thought Vido to himself, not for the first time. I should have stayed at home at the Moot and learned the brewing business, instead of running off to Altdorf to become a thief. At least then, I wouldn't have got mixed up with mad sage-mystics and all his strange business...



TRAILING ALONG grumpily in Konniger's wake, Vido followed him through the maze of corridors and chambers that made up the ancient Hall of Archives, buried deep beneath the headquarters of the Church of Sigmar that itself made up one whole district of the city. The former thief had robbed too many churches in his time to ever feel comfortable on holy ground, and the eerie silence of this sepulchral warren only added to his uneasiness. From up ahead, the voices of Konniger and von Heltz echoed back down the corridor.

'...the break-in was discovered only hours ago. The Temple Guard immediately sealed off all the gates, but it is to be assumed that the culprit is no longer within the temple precincts.'

Konniger gave an unsurprised grunt. It was an open secret that the walls and crypts of the Temple were riddled with more secret passages than anyone had yet managed to map. The fact that so many previous holders of the office of Grand Theogonist had seen fit to create so many escape routes from the place spoke volumes more about Church politics than you'd ever learn from any of the official histories, Konniger had once said.

Vido cast a speculative eye on the heavily barred and padlocked doors that lined the corridor on either side of him. Row upon row of them, stretching back as far as the eye can see... and behind each one, vaults crammed full of the treasures and relics of the Church. There was a lot of old junk – mouldy old books, the mildewed bones of saints and heroes, the blessed bedpan of Heimdal the Nineteenth or whatever – but there were real treasures in there too, he knew. The booty of two thousand years of holy wars and Empire-building. So much of it that they hadn't even got round to properly cataloguing it all yet.

Criminal, it is, Vido grumbled to himself. *All this loot lying down here and*

going to waste. Why, if I wasn't a reformed character these days...

Konniger's voice shook him out of his reverie, reminding him who it was that had brought about that reformation.

'Vido! Your attention, please. We have matters to attend to other than your keen interest in the safekeeping of the contents of Sigmar's vaults.'

'Master?' Vido looked up, meeting Konniger's knowing look. Sometimes he almost believed that Konniger could read minds. Probably another side-effect of that damned powder, he swore silently to himself. He saw that they had reached the corridor's end, and stood at the entrance to the large and well-lit chamber beyond. Bookshelves lined the walls, dusty and still incomplete inventories of the contents of those sealed vaults. More such books were piled up on the writing desks in the centre of the room, where scribes worked during the day to identify and classify the Church's many treasures. One whole area of the chamber was piled up with boxes and packing crates, and Vido saw the definite gleam of gold amongst the debris.

It was only with some difficulty that he managed to turn his gaze towards the group of figures waiting to meet them. Vido saw the different coloured cloaks and cowls of whole hierarchies of different ranks of priesthood. He saw the shine of the polished weapons and armour of at least a dozen members of the Temple Guard. But it was the figure in the centre of the group that caught Vido's attention, the solemn dark-robed figure whose lined and ancient face suggested that he might be almost as old and desiccated as many of the items kept under his care.

'Ah, Herr Konniger. So good to have you amongst us once again' the Chief-Archivist said in a voice that suggested anything but. 'I am pleased to see you respond so quickly to our request, but I am surprised that you have seen fit to involve another in the Church's affairs.'

The Chief-Archivist's gaze swept briefly over Vido with a look of what the Halfling

could only describe as withering contempt. At almost three and a half feet, Vido stood tall for one of his race but at that moment he felt about as big as one of the grotesque homunculus creatures that Konniger kept preserved in brine-filled jars in a cupboard in his study.

Vido felt Konniger's hand rest reassuringly on his shoulder as the sage stepped forward to meet the first challenge of the night. 'My manservant, Vido. In his time in my service, I have found him to be of much help to me in investigations such as this. His presence here is one of the conditions by which I have agreed to come here tonight.'

Konniger and the Chief-Archivist locked eyes across the room. Vido remembered the stories about these two old intellectual adversaries, how the Chief-Archivist had once attempted to have Konniger burned at the stake on charges of heresy against the faith of Sigmar. The Chief-Archivist was first to break his gaze, turning away and making a gesture of obvious dismissal towards Vido, dispelling the Halfling's existence from his mind.

'As you will, Konniger. I had forgotten just how insistently stubborn you could be. I pray Sigmar that you will bring these same qualities to bear on the matter in hand.'

'As do I, Herr Chief-Archivist' Konniger said, nodding respectfully at his old rival. Now that both had made their point, they could proceed with their business together. 'Your envoy provided me with some of the details on the journey here. I am to believe that two guards have been found slain, that it is suspected but as yet unconfirmed that items may have been stolen and that Brother Wollen, a novice-scribe here in the Archives, is missing and believed to be the culprit. Now, in any murder, I've always found it best to deal with the cadavers first...'



HE HAD SEEN dead bodies before but death by strangulation always made Vido feel somewhat queasy. Call it an old thieves' superstition, but the livid faces of the two dead guards, their eyes bulging out their sockets and their swollen tongues protruding from their slack mouths, was a sight he'd rather not spend too long contemplating.

There but for the grace of Ranald go I, the wiry little Halfling decided, staring at the ugly black-and-purple ligature marks on the throats of both corpses and remembering the feel of the hangman's noose round his own throat, that day atop the public gallows in Kaiser's Platz. That day when, just seconds before the trapdoor opened, Vido first heard the voice of Zavant Konniger as the sage came striding up the steps of the gallows platform, bellowing at the hangmen to stop and waving an Imperial decree of stay of execution in his hands.

'Pay attention, Vido. You're not listening to a word I'm saying. How many times have I told you? Logical deduction and proper note-taking are the principle cornerstones of any fieldwork investigation. Read back the last few observations I've just dictated to you!'

Vido scrabbled at the parchment in his hands, trying to make sense of the scratched quill marks written in that damnable shorthand code that the sage had devised and insisted on teaching to his companion. They were in one of the empty vault rooms off the main corridor, now serving as a makeshift mortuary. The bodies of the two dead guards of the Temple Watch were laid out before them on trestle tables before them, with Konniger inquisitively poking and prodding at them.

'Lividity and estimated body temperature consistent with calculated time of theft...' Vido mumbled, 'both deceased only guards on duty in the lower archive chambers at this time... conclude that they were killed by assailants as a necessary, if cold-blooded, precaution against alarm being raised during commission of the main crime. Unfortunate that both cadavers have been

removed from where they were found... possible loss of vital forensic evidence due to bumbling ignorance of uneducated amateurs.'

'And?' barked the ever-impatient Konniger.

'And that's all you said so far, so that's all I've written!' his manservant protested. Konniger shot him a deadly glare. Vido began to suspect that they taught these kind of stares to young initiates at the divinity college located in the temple above. 'Sigmar's Withering Stare', they probably called it. The first weapon in the magical arsenal of any aspiring young priest.

'So what are your conclusions?' Konniger pressed. 'I've given you a head start, but the rest of the evidence is right in front of you. What would you say about the particular cause of death?'

'That they were strangled?' Vido offered, already mentally cringing in readiness for the intellectual onslaught he knew was about to come.

Konniger made a sound of impatient disgust at the back of his throat, a sound that back home in his study would usually act as a forewarning that some heavy object was about to be hurled in fury across the room. 'Sigmar save us from Halflings and half-wits, which mostly amounts to the same thing! I can see that they were strangled. Even those ham-fisted butchers at the College of Surgeons could see that they were strangled. Look at the pattern of ligature marks. Look at the way the wounds cut into the flesh of the throat. Look especially at the way the larynx and Adam's apple have been crushed. Look at all this and now tell me about the particular cause of death!'

Overcoming his vague nausea, Vido leaned over the nearest corpse. He looked up into the expectant face of his master. 'They've both been expertly garrotted?'

Konniger smiled, pleased to see that all those lessons in logical deduction had not been entirely wasted. 'Exactly. Two garrotted guards – and garrotted in a most distinctive manner, I must point out;

and the theft of an artefact from far-distant Araby. Come, Vido. Let's go in search of the last few pieces of the puzzle, and see if our suspicions are correct.'

Vido scurried after Konniger as he strode imperiously out of the vault room. '*Pieces of the puzzle?*' '*See if our suspicions are correct?*' Vido repeated to himself, used to dwelling in the shadow of intellectual inferiority that his master seemed to cast on everyone around him. *Typical. He may know what he's talking about, but I'm as much in the dark here as when we arrived.*



IN THE MAIN archive chamber outside, the Chief-Archivist and his guards and assistants waited to hear Konniger's findings. 'Herr Chief-Archivist!' Konniger's voice echoed shockingly loud in the high-vaulted room. 'It is vital that I see the inventory of items that your missing scribe was working on at the time of his disappearance!'

The old priest bristled visibly in indignation at the tone of Konniger's request, and behind him one of his younger acolytes gasped in disbelief. Clearly, the Chief-Archivist was not in the habit of taking orders from anyone below the rank of Grand Theogonist. He paused, allowing the last echoes of this insult to the dignity of his office to fade away, before choosing to reply in a voice that struggled to retain its authority. 'Von Heltz. The inventory, if you please.'

Konniger almost snatched the leather-bound volume from the hands of the Chief-Archivist's envoy, rapidly flicking through it and running one long thin finger down the list of illuminated entries, muttering to himself the whole time. 'Sealed sarcophagi... no. Golden skull throne... no. Selection of silver death-masks... no. Golden falcon statuette? Certainly not...'

Standing beside him, Vido shifted uncomfortably, well aware that his

master's behaviour could appear more than a little eccentric sometimes, and wondering how much tonight's performance would add to Konniger's reputation as the resident mad mystic of Altdorf.

'One large and unadorned clay jar, wax-sealed with imprint of unidentified pagan hieroglyph... ha! I knew it!'

Konniger slammed the book shut with a flourish of triumph, brandishing it at the Chief-Archivist. 'Sigmar's oath, man! Didn't you recognise it? Didn't any of you know what had unwittingly been passed into your care? Here we are in what is reputedly one of the greatest repositories of learning in the known world, and only a lowly novice-scribe recognised this artefact for what it truly is!'

The Chief-Archivist drew himself up to his full height, glowering at Konniger with an air of haughty indignation. 'My calling is the acquisition of knowledge concerning the greatness and glory of Sigmar, the Empire and the deeds of those who would faithfully serve them both. I leave the understanding of the heathen affairs of the savages of Araby to the likes of fools and novices.'

'Ah yes,' Konniger said as if thinking aloud, looking contemplatively around at the collection of unpacked Araby exhibits that filled the other half of the chamber. 'Our missing novice, and the only piece of the puzzle still unaccounted for. What became of Brother Wollen, I wonder.'

Every eye in the room followed Konniger as he strode amongst the exhibits, his hands distractedly touching the many gold and bejewelled surfaces all around him as he continued his reasoning. 'Quite the budding Araby scholar, I seem to remember. He corresponded with me on several occasions, seeking advice on a few points of particularly obscure Araby history.' Vido looked away, noticing the Chief-Archivist flinch at this remark; obviously correspondence with the theologically-suspect Konniger was not encouraged amongst young and impressionable initiates. 'I was pleased to provide him with a few pointers in the right direction,

but I became concerned with the darker tone that his researches were taking. I wrote to him with my concerns, and heard nothing more from him. I thought nothing of it at the time – I correspond with a large number of my fellow scholars on a variety of topics – but, alas, had I acted on my concerns, everything that has happened here might have been prevented.'

As he spoke, Konniger bent down to inspect the flagstones of the floor, nodding in confirmation at something he had found there, waving one arm at his manservant. 'Vido, your eyes are sharper than mine. Your opinion, if you please, on these marks here.'

Vido greatly doubted that – Konniger's senses were unusually sharp for a human – but hurried forward to take his role alongside his master. He bent down to study the spot indicated by Konniger, seeing the trail of two faint lines marked out in the dust of the floor. Vido had been involved in enough shady deeds in his time to recognise them instantly.

'Drag marks,' he confirmed, looking up at Konniger. 'There's been a body dragged across this floor, and not too long ago either.'

Konniger nodded in appreciation at Vido and started slowly pacing along the floor, following the trail of the near-invisible drag marks. Almost unwillingly, the Chief-Archivist and his guards and assistants followed after him, drawn into the spell of the mystery that Konniger was now unravelling before them.

'So what are we to suppose? That Brother Wollen, a young initiate scholar and certainly no expert assassin, succeeded in overpowering and garrotting two veteran guards? That he then stole one of the valuable Araby artefacts storied here and made his escape through one of the many secret tunnels that infest these vaults?'

'You have a better theory, Herr Konniger?' the Chief-Archivist sneered. 'The facts speak for themselves. You were invited here tonight – against my strongest counsels, I might add – to aid

the Church in the capture of this culprit and the recovery of whatever he has stolen, not to restate what is already clear to everyone here!

Konniger never looked up from the flagstones as he followed the trail of marks through the labyrinth of unpacked artefacts and still-unopened crates, never allowing his concentration to waver as he replied to his old rival's criticisms. 'Let the facts speak for themselves, you say? Very well, then that is what we shall do. If Wollen didn't kill the two guards – and I can tell you now for a fact that he did not – then someone else did; the same unknown accomplices whom Wollen, with his knowledge of Church secrets, was able to smuggle into the Temple through the network of tunnels.' Konniger stopped, pausing either to check that he had not lost the trail or to ensure that his audience was still hanging on his every word.

Then he was moving again, quicker this time as he neared both the end of the trail of marks on the floor and the end of his argument. 'I have no doubt that you have already checked the inventory and found that the most valuable and easily portable items in it can still all be accounted for. It will take days to go through the rest of the items on the list, but I tell you now for a fact that you will find only one item missing. "Large and unadorned clay jar, one, wax-sealed with imprint of unidentified pagan hieroglyph." A mundane item of apparently little value, especially compared to the many other riches on offer here. So the facts leave us with three unanswered questions: why was only this one particular item stolen; who were Wollen's accomplices; and where is Brother Wollen now?'

Konniger had come to a dead stop, standing before the gleaming shape of a large golden sarcophagus standing upright against the far wall of the archive chamber. Adorned in the usual elaborate style of the tomb treasures of Araby, its golden glow seemed to light up that whole area. Konniger stared at it in contemplation, the death-mask features of some long-dead Araby king carved into its

hinged lid eerily returning his stare. 'Vido, would you join me here for a second and tell me what you see.'

Vido shuffled nervously forward to join his master. He didn't mind being this close to so much loot, but he had heard all manner of unpleasant tales about these Araby sarcophagi and the horrible things they sometimes contained.

'Your apprehension is understandable,' Konniger commented, again uncannily picking up on Vido's thoughts, 'but you've nothing to worry about in this case. Dead or undead, whatever was originally laid to rest in here would have long ago been put to the torch by our noble Bretonnian allies when they liberated it during the Crusades. Properly sealed again, it would have made an amusing decorative piece for the baronial hall of some Bretonnian lord. Now, your appraisal, if you please.'

Vido ran his hands speculatively over the inlaid surface of the sarcophagus lid. The old thief in him admired the fine work on the goldleafing and mentally estimated what such an item might fetch on the open market, while the newly-found detective in him searched for the clue here that Konniger had evidently already found and was perhaps trying to lead him to...

'Sealed!' Vido shouted, suddenly realising what his master had been hinting at. 'The seal on the lid has been broken, but when you read from the inventory earlier, all the sarcophagi were listed as having their seals still intact!'

'Exactly,' Konniger commented as he swung open the hinged lid. Vido barely managed to get out of the way of the stiff-armed corpse that fell out of the open sarcophagus. Konniger bent down, casually turning it over to reveal the body of a young man dressed in a plain novice's habit and with his hair tonsured in the severe style of an initiate of the Church of Sigmar. The corpse's face was bloated and livid, the garrotte wire that had killed him still buried deep within his throat. Konniger looked up calmly, taking in the horrified expressions on the faces of the Chief-Archivist and his entourage.

'Now, I've never actually met the young man in question, so would any of you gentlemen care to confirm to me that this is indeed the mortal remains of the missing Brother Wollen?'



THAT WASN'T even nearly funny,' Vido complained, taking another long gulp from Konniger's hip flask, hoping that the strong Bretonnian brandy would help wash away the memory of the swollen-faced corpse lurching towards him out of the sarcophagus. 'And you still haven't explained what this is all about.'

Konniger sat beside him in the richly-upholstered interior of the coach, looking out the window as they rode at breakneck speed through the dark and empty streets of pre-dawn Altdorf. Everything had happened so fast since the discovery of Brother Wollen's body and Vido – even with the benefit of his master's fine taste in spirits – was still struggling to catch up with the subsequent chain of events.

He remembered the look on the face of the Chief-Archivist, the old man still too shocked to object as Konniger took command of the situation and requisitioned his personal coach and a retinue of temple guards. He remembered the race through the corridors of the Archives and the sight of the coach waiting for them in the courtyard above, with Konniger barking one single command – 'The river-docks, and quickly!' to the liveried coachman. And now they were almost there, the chill river mists outside growing thicker the nearer they got to the wharves. From outside Vido could also hear the clatter of horses' hooves on the slick cobblestones, a retinue of Temple Guard cavalry riding alongside the coach.

'Araby,' Konniger said by way of a reply, still gazing out into the misty gloom. Vido

thought he could see the first blush of dawn light through the fog. 'As I said before, everything in this affair connects back to Araby. I should have realised the growing danger when that young fool Wollen first wrote to me asking my help in identifying one particular Araby hieroglyph.' As he spoke, his finger traced quick strokes through the condensation on the rough glass window of the coach. Vido leaned across the seat, seeing nothing but a meaningless jumble of intersecting lines and squiggles.

'I feigned ignorance, advising him to drop the matter and pursue other, more promising subjects of research. Had I thought about it more closely, I would have realised that he had already guessed its meaning and was merely seeking confirmation of his secret discovery.' Konniger abruptly wiped his hand across the window, erasing all trace of the symbol he had described there.

'That symbol, it was the same one on the seal of the missing clay jar?' Vido ventured.

'Indeed,' Konniger replied. 'One of the most potent symbols of Araby magic, put there centuries ago to contain the spirit of the desert Daemon imprisoned within the jar.'

Vido coughed, spluttering up a mouthful of brandy. Ancient Araby magic... imprisoned desert Daemons... what had the master got them into this time?

'I first knew for sure what we were dealing with when I saw the garrotte wounds on the throats of those dead guards,' Konniger continued evenly. 'Only one group I know kills in that distinctive style, and only one thing would have brought them this far north from their desert lairs.'

Vido took another healthy swig from the hip flask, knowing that whatever Konniger was going to say next, it definitely wasn't going to be to the Halfling's liking.

'I assume you've never heard of the Cult of Ishmail, Vido? Few outside of Araby have. They worshipped the foul gods of

Chaos, and Daemons walked freely amongst them in human form. Their power was finally broken centuries before the Bretonnian Crusades when a combined army of Araby tribes laid siege to their mountain fortress. The fortress finally fell, with a cabal of sorcerers defeating the cult's daemonic masters. These creatures could not be destroyed, but were instead imprisoned in magical vessels, which were then carefully hidden the length and breadth of Araby. But remnants of the cult still survive to this day, dedicated to finding these magical prisons and releasing the Daemons contained within.'

Vido hesitated, trying to take all this in. 'So the clay jar in the archives was one of these, um, things, stolen by some Bretonnian Knight during the Crusades and eventually ending up here without anyone ever knowing what it really was?'

Konniger looked at him expectantly, waiting for his manservant to progress to the next logical link in the chain of events. Realisation suddenly dawned in the Halfling's eyes.

'Wollen! Wollen must have recognised it and got word to these maniacs about what he had discovered and where it could be found. But Ranald's Eye, why would he have done that?'

Konniger sat back in his seat, rubbing his eyes in weariness and accepting the proffered hip-flask from Vido. 'For gold, most likely. He seemed an ambitious sort, and wouldn't have been content as a mere novice-scribe.'

'No, he dreamed of life as a great sage and scholar, but scholars need books and expensive libraries, and the freedom to be able to continue their work without worrying about where the next purse of gold crowns would be coming from. After providing the Ishmailis with details of one of the secret routes into the archives, he probably thought it was all just going to be a straightforward robbery. I imagine, when he saw the guards being garrotted, he belatedly began to realise what his own fate was going to be.'

Konniger drained the last of the contents of the flask, absent-mindedly

tucking it away within one of the many inside pockets of his voluminous Kislev-style cloak. 'Alas, as he found to his cost, those who would sup with the servants of Chaos should bring a long spoon to the feast.'

Vido was still puzzling over that last comment – 'Konnigerisms' he called them – when he heard the loud rumble of the coach wheels trundling across thick wooden planks. A bridge he realised. We're crossing the river. Then that must mean we're almost at the—

'The docks!' he said suddenly. You haven't explained why we're going to the docks!'

Konniger smiled before replying. 'You know I study with great interest the comings and goings of the river traffic along the Reik. In a place such as Altdorf, it often pays to know just who or what is entering or leaving the city. Why, just two days ago, I noted the arrival of an Araby merchant caravel and thought it strange that such an exotic vessel, that would be thought a rare sight indeed even in the port of Marienburg, should be found this far upriver.'

'Then the thieves—' interrupted Vido.

'Are already safely back aboard with their stolen cargo and preparing their flight from the city,' Konniger nodded. 'The river gates guarding the harbour are closed during the hours of darkness. They have had to wait until first light to make their escape.'

Vido glanced out of the window, noting the look on the face of the startled watchman at the entrance to the harbour as a full squad of cavalry and a coach bearing the coat of arms of the Church of Sigmar thundered past him. Beyond, Vido could see the harbour itself, with rows of river barges sitting waiting at the loading quays, and the telltale smoke stack of one of the new river steamers firing up its boilers in readiness of an early morning departure.

And there, silhouetted against the rising sun, he saw the outline of an unfamiliar-looking vessel which was even now slipping away from its moorings and heading towards the open river gates...

Vido suddenly panicked as he felt the coach door swing open before him, threatening to send him spilling out of the compartment. At the same time he felt Konniger grab him by the scruff of the neck, safely pulling him back in just as the sage himself leaned fully out of the open door and called out to the figure riding at the head of cavalry group. 'Herr Captain. The river gates! Secure the river gates and close up the mouth of the harbour!'

The soldier raised a mailed fist in acknowledgement, already leading his men towards the gatehouse containing the mechanism that opened and shut the river gates. Two of his men had died at the hands of the thief-assassins, and Vido didn't doubt the man's determination to stop the killers' getaway

'Will that be enough to stop the ship escaping?' Vido asked in trepidation, noticing that Konniger was still standing at the open door of the speeding coach and hadn't yet relinquished his grip on his manservant's cloak collar.

'I doubt it. It will take several minutes to wind the river gates shut again, and by that time the Araby ship will have left the harbour.'

Ob no, bere it comes, thought Vido, feeling Konniger's grip tighten on his collar and shutting his eyes in anticipation of what he knew was going to happen next.

'We've got to get aboard the ship and slow it down,' Konniger said, as if he were announcing a sojourn to the nearest alehouse.



AND THEN they were falling, tumbling out of the speeding coach as it rattled along the quayside. Vido kept his eyes tightly shut, thinking of all the many sharp and hard-edged objects that usually littered every harbour he'd ever seen, and then the breath was knocked out of him as they landed on top

of a large pile of grain sacks. Whether Konniger had known it had been there or not before jumping was something the Halfling would never learn, because they were already on their feet and running up one of the wooden jetties. Ahead, Vido could see the even now sleep-dulled crew of a river barge loading barrels into the hold of their vessel and, just beyond, the sleek shape of the Araby vessel, sliding into view.

'Faster!' Konniger yelled, redoubling his pace and actually picking up his manservant and bodily carrying him down the jetty.

The crew of the river barge visibly gawped at the apparition that suddenly appeared before them – the Empire's most distinguished scholar-sage, with his cloak spread out behind him and a Halfling hanging from his arm, charging out of the morning mist and leaping aboard their ship. Konniger didn't break stride, running across the deck, snatching a boathook out of the hands of a dumbfounded bargeman and using it to pole-vault straight over the other side of the vessel.

He landed sure-footedly on the deck of the caravel as it eased past the moored barge, the shock sending Vido tumbling from his master's shoulders. Vido rolled, absorbing the impact of the fall with the natural agility of a born cat-burglar. Vido jumped to his feet, alert to everything around him and drawing the two cutpurse daggers that he habitually kept hidden inside his doublet.

Old habits die hard, he thought grimly, *and now's where we see whether nearly breaking my neck twice in the last half-minute has been worth the effort.*

The question of whether or not they had landed on the right vessel soon became an academic point, Vido thought, as just about every Araby crewman in sight charged at them in attack. Konniger expertly swung the boathook as if it was a quarterstaff, using the strange but effective fighting style that he claimed to have learned from a travelling wise-man from legendary Cathay. Vido didn't know anything about that, but he did know that

Konniger could break heads with the best of them when he wanted to. The weapon in Konniger's hand was a blur of motion, parrying sword blows, jabbing into vulnerable nerve points or connecting hard with turban-covered skulls. The crew of the Araby vessel retreated, leaving three of their number lying unmoving on the deck at Konniger's feet.

Lurking forgotten on the sidelines of the battle – a skill he'd spent years perfecting – Vido saw a dark figure hanging from the rigging above Konniger's head. Its face was hidden by the same kind of dark veil worn by many of the crew and Vido saw the razor-edged glint of the garrotte wire in its hands as it leaned out above its intended victim. Two blinks later and the assassin tumbled from the rigging, one of Vido's finely-balanced throwing knives buried hilt-deep in its throat.

'What are you doing, you Moot-born cretin?' was the bellowed response from Konniger. 'I'm doing the fighting. You're supposed to be doing something to slow down this damned boat!'

Vido cursed, noting that Konniger's shout had alerted just about everyone else aboard ship to his presence. One of the crew turned and ran towards him. Vido couldn't help but notice the writhing mass of tentacle tattoos that covered most of the Chaos cultist's body, but on the whole Vido's main attention was fixed on the bloodthirsty look on the Araby warrior's face and the heavy scimitar blade in his hand. Vido ducked, avoiding the swinging scimitar, and rolled between the cultist's legs, stabbing upward with his one remaining knife as he did so. A loud but satisfying scream told him that the cultist could look forward to a new career as a harem guard at the court of one of those fabulously wealthy Araby sultans he had heard tales about.

Now what? Vido asked himself, rolling clear of the falling body of the cultist and finding himself at the pointy-shaped front end of the ship. I'm a Halfling. I come from a race with a long and proud tradition of staying well away from wide open stretches of water, so what do I know about boats? He paused for a

second, kicking over a barrel into the path of another group of cultists running up the deck towards him.

Think about it, Vido, came a voice in his head that sounded worryingly like Konniger's, watching the cultists either fall over the obstacle or slip in the spreading pool of oil and pitch that came sloshing out of the barrel as it rolled along the deck. *Boats have big sail things to make them go when it's windy and those oar things for when it's not. So what do they have to make them stop?*

One of the cultists leaped over the spreading pool of oil and came at Vido with a garrotte wire wrapped round his fists. Vido neatly side-stepped, tripping his attacker with an outstretched hairy foot. The cultist fell forward, smacking face first into a rope-wound capstan wheel at the side of the deck and setting it into rapid motion. Vido heard the ominous splash of something heavy falling off the front of the ship, followed closely by the scream of the cultist as he became entangled in the unwinding rope and was catapulted over the side of the ship.

'Bravo, Vido!' came a bellow from Konniger. 'Even if they manage to weigh anchor again, it'll be too late to escape from the harbour!'

Although clueless about what Konniger was talking about, Vido was distracted enough by his master's unexpected praise to almost not see the flaming missile that buried itself into the deck a few feet away from him. An arrow, he realised. One of those gung-ho Temple Guard types on the shore is aiming for the sail and trying to set it on fire. As Vido watched, the burning arrowhead set light to a pool of spilled pitch and oil, instantly creating a flickering trail of fire that sped along the length of the deck heading straight back towards--

'Master! Look out!' Vido screamed, throwing himself forward and over the trail of flame just as it reached the stack of barrels where he had been standing. He rolled through the circle of cultists surrounding Konniger and cannonballed straight into him, knocking away Konniger's feet away from under him.

'Vido, what in Morr's name do you think-' was as far as the outraged sage managed to get before the ship's prow erupted into a roaring ball of fire. Vido pinned Konniger to the deck as a wave of flame heat washed over them. One of the Araby cultists, wreathed head to foot in flames, stumbled past, screaming and blindly clawing at the burning air around him. Searing gobbets of oil and pitch rained down all around them, setting alight the rest of the ship or landing hissing and spluttering in the waters of the harbour.

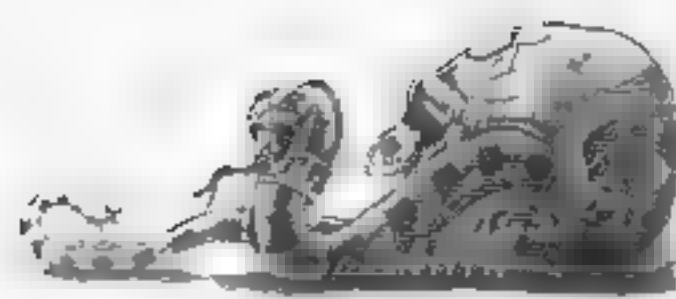
Vido felt the deck lurch beneath him as the shattered front end of the ship sank into the water. Well, at least the water will put the fire out, he consoled himself, before a loud splintering sound announced that the burning mast and sail were about to collapse on top of them.

Vido grabbed Konniger, dragging him across the deck towards the side of the ship. Konniger shrugged him off, pointing towards the open hatch of the cargo hold. 'The Daemon jar! It's somewhere down there! We must recover it! We must ensure that it is returned to a proper place of safekeeping. Somewhere where the Ismailis can never again find it!'

Vido stared in disbelief at his master, noting that Konniger was oblivious to the fact that his own cloak had been set alight by the falling hail of burning oil. Vido glanced at the entrance to the cargo hold, tongues of flame already leaping from the open hatch, and then at the burning mast looming over them. Quickly calculating the odds between two different ways to certain death and the chance of continued living, Vido made his move, taking firm hold of his master and pushing him hard over the side of the ship. Vido hit the water a heartbeat later, showered in a cloud of firefly-like embers sent up as the burning mast and rigging collapsed and crashed through the decking of the ship.

Swallowing his first mouthful of harbour water, Vido remembered an important fact that his subconscious had been carefully blocking out until now.

Halflings can't swim!



BLEEAAUUUGH!' Vido leaned over the side of the rowboat, vomiting up another stomachful of foul-tasting water and vowing to take issue the next time he heard some drunken riverboatman singing one of those alehouse songs about the clean clear waters of the rolling River Reik.

For his part, Konniger sat at the stern of the boat the Temple Guard had launched the rescue them, staring gloomily at the burning wreck of the caravel as it finally sank below the surface. 'Maybe all is not lost' he said, speaking for the first time since the two of them had been pulled out of the water. 'The harbour mouth isn't so deep. Maybe the wreck could be raised and the contents of its hold still be recovered.'

One of the oarsmen on the boat looked up, shaking his head in disagreement.

'Not very likely this time of year, sir. Spring thaw's got the river swollen to bursting, and them strong undercurrents come right under the gates and into the harbour and sweep away anything lying on the bottom. Whatever you were after, the river's got it now, and old Father Reik don't give up anything he's got until he's carried it right past Marienburg and out to sea.

'No, sir, neither you nor anyone else will be finding that cargo again'

Vido looked up, hacking up the last of the river water and catching the look of sudden realisation in Konniger's eyes. 'A proper place of safekeeping' you said,' the Halfling murmured.

'Somewhere the cult can never again find it,' echoed Konniger. And the oarsmen continued rowing towards the shore, wondering why their two battered, burned and half-drowned passengers were both suddenly bellowing together with laughter. ●



OBVIOUS TACTICS!

Episode Ten

SCRIPT & ART DAVID PUGH

MILLIONS OF INNOCENT CITIZENS ARE HIDDEN BENEATH THE CAPITAL. COMMLINKS HAVE BEEN DESTROYED DURING THE INVASION, SO TWO BLOOD ANGELS AND A CALLIDUS ASSASSIN RACE TO WARN THE FLEET.



...THERE,
PLATFORM
OMICRON!

WARNING!
YOU ARE
ENTERING A
PLANETARY
COMBAT
ZONE!

DAMAGED
THUNDERHAWK
COMING FROM
OBZIDION, SIR!

THE DEVIL...
THE PLANET IS
CLOSED TO ALL
TRAFFIC.

OUR RESPONSE,
SIR?

BLAST IT
OUT OF OUR
SPACE!

FFERRAAK!

THEY'RE
FIRING
AT US!

HOLD
TIGHT...

I'M
GOING
IN!

SEAL
THE NORTH
TRANSSEPT
DOOR!

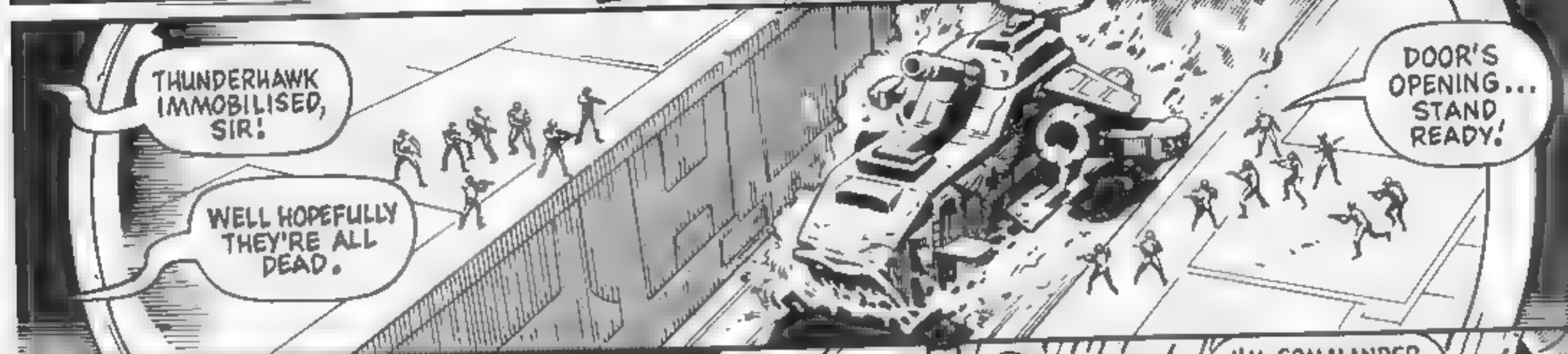
CURSE IT!
HE'S THROUGH,
CALL OUT THE
GUARD!

SHOOT
IT
DOWN!

IT'S BEEN A
LONG WHILE SINCE
I'VE FLOWN ONE
OF THESE...

SSKRAAAASH!

KRUNK!



THUNDERHAWK
IMMOBILISED,
SIR!

WELL HOPEFULLY
THEY'RE ALL
DEAD.

DOOR'S
OPENING...
STAND
READY!



WHO'S IN
CHARGE
HERE?!

AS BEFITS HER KIND, THE ASSASSIN
REMAINS HIDDEN ABOARD...



I'M COMMANDER
PIOS...

THIS BOMBARDMENT
MUST BE STOPPED.
MILLIONS OF SOULS
ARE AT STAKE!

NONSENSE...
THE PLANET IS
EVACUATED!



I CAN
SMELL
EVIL.

OPEN
THE CARGO
HOLD!



PLAGUE BEARERS!

THE ANGELS HAVE BETRAYED US!

TO BE CONTINUED



IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

By Bill King

THE ATMOSPHERE in the steering chapel of the *Spiritus Sancti* was tense as the Scouts pushed through the brocade-curtained archway into the cool basalt fastness of the command centre. Tech-adepts chanted, counting down the range. The machine language gibberish of shaven-headed monitors hummed in the background, a constant, incomprehensible babble. Above them, on the cat-walks, dark-robed figures strode from control-icon to control-icon, checking the purity seals of the major systems and wafting censers of burning incense. The chapel bustled with a controlled panic that Sven Pederson had never encountered before. The young Space Marine didn't need the red warning globes hovering on either side of the holo-pit to tell him that the starship was at battle-stations.

'Ah, gentlemen, there you are at last. I'm so pleased you could join us.' The measured tones of Karl Hauptman, commander of this vessel, cut easily through the noise.

'You summoned us, jarl. We are your bondsmen and we obey.' Sergeant Hakon spoke evenly but Sven could tell that the Rogue Trader's mockery had touched a nerve. Hakon was a proud old warrior, passed over for Terminator duty, and it rankled to have to serve under this foppish aristocrat, supervising a bunch of Scouts on their first training mission. Still, he was a Space Wolf to the bone and had to obey.

Hauptman lounged easily behind the master lectern, projecting effortless authority, the one man present who seemed perfectly calm. He seemed more than Hakon's equal in stature although the giant Space Marine towered over him.

The Shipmaster gestured to the holo-pit with one long, perfectly manicured finger. Control runes flickered emerald

on the lectern, underlighting his face and giving it a hollow, almost daemonic look. 'Give me the benefit of your wisdom, Brother-Sergeant Hakon – what do you make of that?'

One of the monitors closed his camera-eyes and intoned a mantra. Sven had a clear view of the cyberlink feeds that connected the man to his work-lectern. Each tiny fibre pulsed with light. The rhythm of the pulses slowed until they coincided with that of the chant. When the monitor opened his eyes again, their mirrored lenses caught the light, burning in the gloom like tiny red suns.

An object appeared in the pit: it was greyish and round, and looked like a small asteroid. Hauptman gestured again. The plainsong of the tech-priests swelled, echoing under the groined ceiling of the chapel. The smell of hallucinogenic incense grew sweeter and more sickly. Sven felt slightly nauseous as his system adjusted to the drug then neutralised it. The air blurred, lights flickered and the object expanded then came into better resolution.

For no reason he could think of, the sight filled Sven with dread. He glanced at Brother-Cadet Njal Bergstrom, his closest friend among the other Space Wolves. The ruddy light of the warning globes stained his pale face, making the look of horror there more intense. Njal had tested positive for psychic abilities and, if he survived his cadetship, might be trained as a Librarian, just as Sven would be trained as a Wolf Priest. Whatever, Sven had learned to respect his comrade's intuition.

'Extremely unusual. Are those doorways in the thing's side? Is it a base of some sort?' Hakon was clearly puzzled.

Hauptman stroked his beard, cocked his head to one side. 'Astropath Chandara assures me that it is alive. Sensor

divination appears to confirm this.'

The man he had mentioned stood beside the command throne, clutching at the arm-rest as if it were the only thing that held him upright. Sweat beaded his dark, pudgy face and formed deep circles under the armpits of his white robes. Chandara looked stricken, like a man in the latter stages of some fatal fever. His eyes had the fey, haunted look that Sven had seen in Whalehunter Shamans when the death-madness came upon them.

'I beg of you, shipmaster, destroy this abomination. Nothing but evil can come from preserving it a moment longer.' Chandara's husky voice carried a strange resonance, the certainty of prophecy.

Hauptman spoke reassuringly. 'Don't worry, my friend. If it proves necessary I will destroy it instantly. However it may be that this deviant artefact contains something of use to the Imperium. We must investigate, if only to increase the knowledge of the scholars of the Adeptus Terra.'

Sven could tell that Chandara disagreed but could not challenge the Shipmaster's authority. The Astropath shrugged in resignation. Like many of the crew he had become completely used to obeying orders.

Sergeant Hakon understood where all this was leading. 'You want my men to investigate this deviant nest.'

Hauptman smiled as if Hakon were a child who had been quick on the uptake. 'Yes, sergeant. I'm sure that you are competent enough to manage this.'

Sven saw how the statement trapped Hakon; to refuse would be to call his ability into question. He was manipulated only for a moment but that moment was long enough. Hakon responded instantly and with pride: 'Of course.'

Sven would have liked him to have asked more questions and he could see that once the words were out of his mouth the sergeant wished that he had done so. Now it was too late. They were committed.

'Prepare the boarding torpedo,' Hauptman said. 'Your squad can begin its investigations immediately.'

HELMETS READY, preserver systems primed, the Space Marines sat in the cold, dark fuselage of the boarding torpedo. Sven studied each of his companions in turn, taking a last glimpse before they donned their almost insect-like breather masks, trying to fix their faces in his mind. Each ragged visage was obscured by war-paint. He was suddenly, painfully aware that that this might be that last time he ever saw his comrades alive.

Sergeant Hakon sat still, his body tense. His bolt pistol held firmly against his chest. His taut-skinned, thin lipped features were set. The cold blue eyes peering out from beneath a skullcap of silver-grey hair. Unlike the cadets, Hakon did not keep his head shaved except for a single strip of hair. He was a full Space Marine.

Njal sat opposite Sven beneath a stained glass window that showed stars through a portrait of the apotheosis of the Emperor into the Throne of Eternal Life. Njal had his hands folded as if in prayer, his fine ascetic features were composed and calm. Sven guessed that he was sub-vocalising the Litany Against Fear.

'Why didn't Hauptman send in his house troops?' asked Egil, his bulldog face set in its characteristic permanent sneer. Of all the Space Wolf cadets he was the most flawed. His eyes held the cold, frozen, madness so characteristic of troll-blooded berserkers. He had broken two of Sven's ribs during unarmed combat practise back on Fenris and smiled coldly as the younger Scout was carried to the Apothecarion. Sven had overheard Sergeant Hakon tell Brother-Captain Thorsen that he would be keeping a special eye on Egil. Whether that was good or bad, Sven had never decided.

'The guards were probably too scared to travel in this rust-bucket they call a boarding torpedo. By the ghost of Leman Russ, I can't say I blame them.' This came from Gunnar, the squad support man who grinned amiably as he said it. He smiled, revealing the specially lengthened incisors that were the mark of the Space Wolf gene-seed. There was something

reassuring about Gunnar's broken-nosed, heavily pock-marked features, Sven thought.

Hakon let out a short bark of mirthless laughter. 'When you have seen as much combat in the Emperor's service as those guardsmen have then you will be true Space Marines. Till then, mock them not. Simply thank the Emperor for providing you with this chance to show your own bravery.'

'I hope this thing is full of deviants,' Egil said with relish. 'I'll prove my bravery soon enough.'

Gunnar slapped a cartridge into his weapon. 'Don't worry, Njal, we'll see you're safe.'

Sven knew that Gunnar was just teasing. The worried expression on Njal's face made it plain that he did not.

'I can look after myself,' he said sharply.

Gunnar clapped him on the shoulder of his armour and laughed. 'I know you can, little brother. I know you can.'

'Final checks,' Sergeant Hakon said. Each marine fell silent as he concentrated on the prayers necessary to activate his armour.

Sven knew that his suit was well-maintained. He had carried out all the maintenance rituals himself, washing the armour with scented oils while intoning the Litany Against Corrosion, greasing the articulated joints with blessed unguents, checking the pipes of the rebreather with coloured smoke from an auto-censer. He believed firmly in the old Space Marine saying, if you look after your equipment it will look after you.

Yet it went deeper than that. He knew that the armour he had been given was really only loaned to him. He felt a sense of reverence for the ancient artefact. It had been worn by a hundred generations of Space Wolves before his birth and would be worn by a hundred more after his death. He was part of a family of wolves that stretched off into the homeless future. When he touched the armour he touched the living history of his chapter.

Now, as he touched each command helmet in turn, he tried to imagine the

previous wearers of the armour. Each, like him, had been chosen from the blond haired seafarer clans of the island chains of Nordheim. Each, like him, had undergone the years-long basic training of the Space Marine. Each, like him, had undergone the implantation of the various bio-systems that had transformed them into a superman far stronger, faster and more resilient than an ordinary mortal. Some had gone on to glory; others had died in this armour. Sven had often wondered which group he would belong to when his time came. Now the sense of foreboding he had felt when he first saw the alien artefact returned.

He was aware how much he relied on this armour for protection. Its ceramite carapace to protect him from heat and cold and enemy fire. Its auto-sensory systems that let him see in the darkness. Its recycling mechanisms that let him breathe in hard vacuum and survive for weeks on his own reconstituted excrement. As these thoughts filtered into his mind, his prayers moved from being an empty recital of a well-worn litany into something genuine and sincere. He did not want to die and perhaps his suit might save him.

He fitted the comm-net ear-head into place and checked the position of the speaking circlet over his larynx. He bowed his head and prayed that the ship's Tech-Adepts had taken as much care of the equipment as his order's own lay-brothers would. Once inside the alien artefact it might be his only means of communication with his fellow Scouts.

He pushed his hands together in prayer, feeling the muscle amplification of the suit's exoskeleton lend him the strength of dozens. He closed his eyes and let the pheromone traces of his companions be picked up by the suit's receptors. He knew that if the alien artefact was pressurised he could identify his companions, even in total darkness, by scent alone. With an act of will he switched his hearing from normal sound to comm-net pickup. The sub-vocalised activation litanies of his companions rang in his ears, interspersed with the comms chatter of the ship's crew.

'Helmets on,' the sergeant said. In turn the Space Marines donned their protective headgear. One by one, each gave the thumbs up sign. When his turn came Sven did the same. He felt the click of the helmet lock as it slid into place. Targeting icons appeared in his sight underneath the Gothic script of his head-up display. All the read-outs were fine. He gave the signal. The sergeant put his own helm on last.

'All clear. The Emperor is served,' Hakon said for them all.

'The Blessing of the Holy One upon you,' responded the ship's controller. There was a hiss and a fine mist filled the air as the cabin was depressurised. The external temperature dropped sharply; a frost-blue icon flashed an appropriate warning. It clicked for three heartbeats to indicate a lack of air-pressure. There was another click from the neckband of the armour. Sven knew that his helmet had locked into place and could not now be removed until his suit had checked the atmosphere and found it safe for breathing.

There was a faint kick of acceleration. For a moment Sven felt weightless as the boarding torpedo left the artificial gravity field of the *Spiritus Sancti*, then a fraction of his normal weight returned as the torpedo accelerated. In the view monitors the starship showed first as a vast metal wall. As it receded, the turrets that studded its exterior became visible, then the whole ship from winged stern to dragon-beaked prow. The sheer size of the ship was obvious from the hundreds of great arched windows, each of which Sven knew was the length of a whaling ship and taller than its mast. The Rogue Trader's vessel dwindled until it was nearly lost amid the stars, just one point of light among many. In the flickering green forward monitors, the alien object swelled ominously in size.

'There's no turning back now,' he heard Njal mutter.

'Good,' Egil said.

With a violent, lurching shudder, the boarding torpedo lodged itself in the wall of the alien artefact. Sven opened his eyes

and ceased praying. He hit the quick release amulet on the restraining straps and floated free for a moment before the boarding torpedo's artificial gravity returned.

The squad had moved to ready positions covering the forward bulkhead doors with all their weapons. Vibration thrummed through the soles of Sven's boots as the boarding torpedo's drilling nose-cone bored into the other vessel's walls. After a moment the motion ceased.

+Squad, ready to disperse!+ Hakon's voice came clear over the comm-link.

+Opus Dei!+ the squad responded.

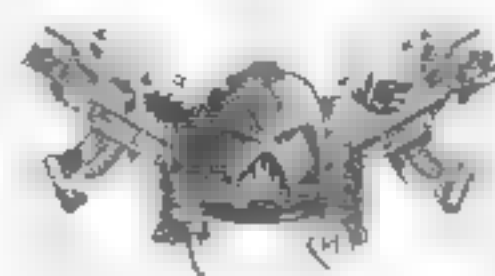
The bulkhead doors swung open and the Scout's covered the area with their weapons, just as they had practised a thousand times in training. Sven braced himself as air rushed into the torpedo, misting as it hit the chill within the vehicle.

+Ghost of Russ!+ someone breathed. +I don't believe it.+

Their helmet lights revealed an awesome vista. They stared down into a vast corridor, as high as the chapel ceiling on the *Spiritus Sancti* and the colour of fresh meat. The walls were not smooth and regular; they looked rough and were covered in innumerable folds, like the exposed surface of the brain the Medics had shown him during his novitiate. The walls glistened with pink mucous.

From each fold of the wall protruded thousands of multicoloured cilia, each metres long and as fine as titanite thread. They swayed like ferns in a breeze. Here and there huge, muscle-like sacs pulsed. Orifices in the wall opened and shut in time with their pulsing, making sounds like last laboured breaths. Sven guessed that they were circulating air. Fluid gurgled through transparent pipes that lined the walls like great veins.

+Looks like the place is inhabited+ Gunnar said. His voice sounded too loud over the comm-link.



SPORES DANCED and glittered in the air, catching the light and twinkling like stars in the void of space. As they responded to the helmet lights, they seemed to ignite with phosphorescence, like fireflies, and the glow became dazzling. Sven blinked and his second, translucent eyelids dropped into place, filtering the light back to a manageable level. His armour's glowlamps dimmed automatically as the ambient light increased.

While Gunnar covered them, Egil and Njal moved forward, following a standard, well-drilled pattern. As they left the torpedo, their feet sank into the spongy floor of the alien vessel. They walked as if on a thick carpet, disturbing the waving cilia. Sven wondered whether the fronds were some sort of early warning device or whether they might even be poisonous.

The atmosphere icon on his display flashed green three times and then settled. There was a click as the neck-lock of his helmet released. Sven advanced into the alien vessel, flexing his knees to compensate for the gravity shift. The ship seemed to be generating its own internal gravity with centripetal force from its rotation. Even so, Sven felt as if he were only half his normal weight.

Sergeant Hakon had already undone his helmet, and stood taking several deep breaths. He grimaced as his bio-engineered system adapted to the local conditions. Sven knew that he would soon be acclimatised to the local conditions and immune to any toxins present in the atmosphere. After a long, tense minute, Hakon gestured for them all to remove their helms.

The first thing that surprised Sven was how warm it was. The air seemed almost blood heat. He started to sweat as his body compensated for the temperature and the humidity. He coughed as the membranes within his gullet filtered out the airborne spores. The sparkling colours of his surroundings filled his sight; the inside of the ship was a riot of hues glowing with phosphorescent fire in the vessel's warm, shadowy interior.

He was reminded of the coral reefs around the equator on Nordheim where the Space Wolves kept their summer palaces, far from the icy mountains and glaciers of Fenris. He had often gone swimming through the reefs after the battle exercises on the warmer tropical islands. The walls reminded him of certain formations of hard coral. He wondered whether this ship had been created from similar creatures, colonies of microscopic organisms joined to form one vast structure. Everything looked tranquil; it seemed safe and relaxing.

Suddenly, something lashed past him and stung his face. He flinched and reflexively swung his pistol up and fired. The bolter kicked in his hand as it released its missile. In the brief second between pulling the trigger and watching the thing explode, he caught sight of what looked like a metre-wide jellyfish, drifting parachute-like on the air currents. His face went numb as bio-systems moved to cope with the toxin.

'Careful,' said Sergeant Hakon. 'We don't know what we'll find here.' He moved over to Sven and passed a medical amulet over the wound. The small gargoyle headed talisman did not flicker. It gave no warning chime.

'You seem to be coping,' Hakon said calmly. At the sound of the shot the rest of the Space Wolves had taken up positions facing outward covering all lines of fire. Nothing obvious menaced them. No more floating jellyfish came in sight.

The ceiling had started to glow; long veins of bio-luminescent tubing had flickered to life as if in response to the presence of the Scouts. They illuminated the corridor which curved downwards out of sight. Sven was reminded of the inside of a snail's shell.

Sven felt slightly nauseous as the tailored antibodies of his bloodstream dealt with whatever invaders the alien creature had injected. He was struck by a comparison. Perhaps the jellyfish thing had been an antibody responding to the appearance of the Scouts.

He tried to dismiss the thought as mere fancy but the thought kept returning that

perhaps the alien ship had other ways of dealing with intruders.



THEY ADVANCED cautiously through the pulsing dark. Their cat-like eyes had adjusted to the gloom. They kept their weapons ready to deal death. At every turn and junction they left comm-link relays. These kept them in touch with the *Spiritus Sancti* and served as navigation beacons.

'Ghost of Russ!' Sven cursed, slipping and falling on the mucous-covered floor. The spongy surface absorbed the impact as he rolled back into a crouch. Njal moved over to make sure he was all right. Sven could see the look of concern on his face. He waved his friend away, almost embarrassed by the fall.

'We are in the belly of leviathan,' Njal said, studying walls the colour of bruised flesh. Sven grimaced; the rotten meat stench of their surroundings made him want to gag. He glanced round.

In the dim light, the other Space Marines were spectral, ghostly figures. Gunnar was on point duty; the rest of the Scouts straggled back in a long line behind him. The sergeant brought up the rear. Breathing sacs deflated a stream of mist and spores erupted forth, refracting the light from the Scouts' armour, turning it into rainbows.

'I never much cared for that story, brother,' Sven said quietly, wiping mucous from his armour. His father loved telling him the old tale: of the fisherman, Tor, who was swallowed by the giant sea-monster leviathan and lived in its vast belly for fifty days before being rescued by the original Space Wolf Terminators and being asked to join their order. His father had used it to frighten Sven and his brothers to keep them from stealing out to sea on their makeshift rafts. At least he had, until the day when he had set out on his dragonship and never returned. As a child, Sven had always suspected that leviathan had got him.

When he had finally become a cadet, he had laughed at such childish stories. He had consulted the Archivum of the Order and discovered that the story of Tor and the leviathan was a truly ancient tale, one dating back to before the Imperium, to the distant, time-lost days of primordial Earth. It existed in one form or another on many Imperium worlds, a distant trace memory of a time before humanity colonised the galaxy. He had never thought to be troubled by it again.

Now, within the bowels of this alien ship, he found the horror of the ancient tale had returned to him. He could hear his father's rasping voice speaking in the darkness of the longhouse as the winter gales howled outside. He remembered the chill that filled him when the old man had dwelt on the nauseating things found in the sea monster's belly.

He recalled as well looking out to sea on stormy nights when gale-driven waves lashed the black rocks and imagining huge monsters, bigger than his home island lurking beneath the sea. It was the memory of his strongest boyhood fear and now it returned to haunt him. He felt the same way now; all around he sensed the presence of a huge, waiting monster.

All around him in the gloom he sensed presences. Overhead, he thought he heard the flapping of wings. When he glanced up he was startled to see dark forms like a shoal of manta rays, flapping along the ceiling. As he watched, they vanished into orifices in the flesh wall.

Fluids gurgled through the pipe-veins around him. He was within some vast living being and he knew it for certain now. And he was sure that it knew of his presence in some dim, instinctual way, sensed him and resented his intrusion. There was a sense of evil, malign intelligence about this alien vessel. It was a presence inimical to humanity and any other form of life.

Sven felt an almost claustrophobic terror. His heart beat sounded like thunder in his ears. His breath seemed loud than the breathing the valves of the ship. He fingered the hilt of his mono-molecular knife uneasily and recited the

comforting words of the Imperial Litany to himself. In this place, at this time, the words sounded hollow, empty. He met Njal's gaze and saw the unvoiced fear there too. Neither of them had expected their first mission to be like this.

'Move on, brothers.' Hakon's voice seemed to come from far away. Sven forced himself to move deeper into the darkness.



FROM THE MOMENT he had set foot on this alien ship, Njal had known he was doomed to die. More than any of his companions, he was aware of the strangeness of this vessel and the fact that it was alive. He knew that it was dormant at present but it would take only the slightest of actions to waken it. It was only a matter of time. He felt it in his bones.

Ever since he had been a child, that feeling of unconquerable dread had continually been proved correct. Njal had never been wrong. He had watched Sven's father's ship, the *Waverider*, set sail that fatal morning knowing it would never return. He had wanted to warn them but he knew that it was useless. Each man aboard had been marked for death and it was unavoidable. And so it came to pass.

He had watched a party of hunters led by Ketil Strongarm disappear into the mountains above Orm's Fjord. The stink of death was upon them. He had wanted to warn them not to go. He knew without being able to explain why that they would never return. Two days later, word came back that Ketil and all of his brothers had been killed by an avalanche.

The night that his mother had died Njal had sensed the presence of death, swooping like an immense, midnight-black hawk to carry the old woman away. The Whalehunter Shaman had assured his father that the fever had broken. Njal knew differently and in the cold, mist-strangled morning he had been proved

correct. He had not cried as the pallbearers were summoned. He had said his farewells long before in the darkness.

He worried about his inability to speak, at what had locked his lips. He had been unable to talk about his forebodings even with his tutors in the Space Wolves' Citadel. In later years he had worried that it was pride. His gift had set him apart from the others and if he had warned them, he would have proven it wrong. Perhaps the future was fixed and there was nothing any man could do about it; or perhaps he wanted to be correct, needed the secret, almost proud knowledge of his own uniqueness. He smiled bleakly to himself. Many and subtle were the traps of Daemons.

He was a sensitive; the Space Wolf Librarians in the Fortress Among the Glaciers had confirmed this. They said that, in time, his talent would mature and they would teach him how to channel it. All he had to do was ward himself from impure thoughts. But his time had run out and he knew it. He did not want to die so soon and all of the training he had received could not alter the fact. He was more scared than he had ever been.

Shocked by his own blasphemy, he cursed the old Librarians. What could the old fools who ruled Fenris like gods from their cloud-girt citadel, know of how he felt? A single, sensitive youth isolated among people who might burn him as a Daemon-spawned freak. Since the time of the ancient wars, the Sea Peoples had been wary of anything that smacked of the preternatural. Anger and resentment surged through him.

He felt more alone than ever surrounded by his fellow cadets, all of whom except Sven made fun of him. They reminded him of the older lads in his home village of Ormscrag who had mocked him until the day he had grown large enough to give them a good hiding. Marching here in the alien gloom, Njal felt his lifelong resentment of the others, the lesser mortals, the ungifted, return.

The intensity of the feeling surprised him. Why was he so filled with bitterness towards the comrades with whom he had

gone through basic training? Why did he hate the patronising tutors of the order who had done nothing but good for him? Was it because they had circumscribed his choices, had forced him onto the dark path that had led to this terrible place of death?

Njal tried to calm himself. All roads lead to death eventually, he told himself. It is the manner in which you walk the path that is important. Somehow, at that moment, the noble sentiment of the old Chapter saying seemed cheap and tawdry.

Briefly he considered that the thoughts might not be his own, that they might be being projected into his mind by some outside source. Then, abnormally quickly, he rejected the idea and decided that it was simply his lifelong feelings emerging in the face of death. He was being made uneasy by the strangeness of his surroundings and his own forebodings.

All around him, the things that slept in the darkness stirred towards wakefulness.



SVEN GLANCED DOWN the long corridor. The composition of the walls seemed to have changed as the Scouts made their way deeper into the alien vessel. They were slicker, smoother and gave more impression of life. It was darker and more alive seeming. Here and there, vein-pipes vanished beneath the flesh of the walls, leaving only smooth bulges.

'It seems to be becoming more active the deeper we get,' he said into the comm-link. 'The walls seemed engorged with blood.'

'I think the beast stirs,' Njal said.

Sven stared back at him coldly. The last thing he wanted to be reminded of was that they were inside some vast living creature.

'I hope Hauptman is getting good pictures of this,' Gunnar said cheerfully. 'If I'm going to be swallowed alive I want it to be in a good cause.'

'That's enough,' Hakon said. His voice was edgy. He had obviously detected the undercurrent of fear in the Scouts' nervous chatter and decided to put an end to it. The cadets fell silent for a while.

The corridor ended in a massive fleshy sphincter valve.

'It looks like an airlock,' Sven said, studying it. The doorway rippled moistly. The Scout warily eyed the folds of flesh surrounding the valve.

'I'll open it,' Egil said and blasted away at it with his bolt pistol. The bolts tore into the flabby mass of flesh. The valve-door spasmed as if in pain, the whole floor shaking as underfloor muscles joined the action. The Scouts were thrown flat, unable to keep their footing on the unstable floor. Sven's head struck something hard and his vision filled with stars for a moment.

'Is everyone all right?' Hakon asked after the footing settled back down again. Everyone nodded or murmured. Hakon glared at Egil. 'Don't ever do that again. Don't even think about doing anything like that ever again unless I specifically order you to!' Cold menace filled the sergeant's voice.

Egil looked away and shrugged.

Sven inspected the door. Great gobbets of flesh had been torn out of it but it still barred their way. Another shot would tear the ruptured muscle away. He didn't know whether they should risk another small earthquake.

He paused to think. The more they proceeded, the more the alien spaceship resembled two things: a giant living body, and the work of some alien technology. There was obviously some plan to its layout. The plan might be incomprehensible to the human mind but it was there. These sphincter valves were obviously airlocks of some kind but they were too far into the ship for them to open onto vacuum.

Perhaps they were a safety measure like the bulkheads on the *Spiritus Sancti*, designed to section off an area if decompression occurred. Or perhaps they were security systems barring access to certain areas.

Either way, there must be some means of opening them. Suddenly it dawned on Sven that he was thinking from a purely human perspective. It did not need to be true. Perhaps the doors sensed the presence of authorised personnel and opened automatically or perhaps they responded to scent cues the Scouts could not duplicate. If either of these theories were the case then perhaps Egil's was the only way forward.

Sven noticed a small fleshy node near the valve. Acting on impulse he reached out and stroked it. The partially-torn door flapped open with a soft, almost animal sigh. Egil looked at the fingers of his gauntlet. They were covered in pink slime. It was scented like musk. He wiped his fingers against his chest piece, taking care to avoid touching the Imperial Eagle on the breastplate.

Sergeant Hakon nodded at him in approval, then gestured for them all to proceed. Sven stepped through into the fleshy gloom.



EGIL GLARED EAGERLY out into the shadows. Murder-lust burned in his heart. He felt the same warm excitement as he had felt the night before his first great battle. Anticipation filled him. He could sense the danger here, the threat of the unknown. He relished it, confident in his ability to master whatever stepped into his path.

He glanced contemptuously at Sven and Njal and smiled to himself. Let the white-livered cowards be afraid, he thought. They were unworthy to be true Space Marines and in this test they would be found wanting. A born Space Wolf knew no fear. He lived only to slaughter the enemies of the Emperor and die a warrior's death, so that he might sit at the right hand of his God in the Hall of Eternal Heroes.

Seeing the worried look on Sven's face he felt like laughing. The whelp was afraid; the prospect of death made him

uneasy! Egil knew in his heart that death was a warrior's true and constant companion; he had done since he tore out an Ormscrag warrior's throat with his teeth during his first night-raid. Death was not something to inspire fear. Rather, it was the true measure of a man: how much death he could inflict and how he faced his own.

He did not expect anything better from Njal and Sven. He had always been astonished that the Space Wolves recruited from the Islanders. They were a puny people, hardly worthy to be called warriors. They cringed on their islands and cruised only the coastlines of their tiny domains. His own people were much better kin to the Gods of the Glacier.

The Storm-riders took their ships to the four corners of the world, raiding where they pleased and following the ocean-going herds of leviathan. Yes, they were much more worthy. It took a true man to stare into the eye of leviathan and still be able to throw a harpoon straight. It took a true man to sail the open sea where the only company was the mammoth shark, the leviathan and mightiest of all, the kraken. He felt almost pity towards the islanders. How could they understand the great truths of his people?

He glanced at the great hallway with its arch of bone white ribs visible through a tightly stretched ceiling the colour of putrefying meat. He looked at the cancerous growths that marred the floor and walls, at the strange pods of translucent membrane that expanded and contracted like a child's balloon. He looked at the puddles of rank, bile-like fluid that covered the floor. He wiped beads of sweat from his face and took another lungful of the acrid acidic air.

Egil knew that it did not matter to a true warrior whether he died here among the alien growths or at sea with storm winds tossing his hair and the salt spray lashing his face. Like the others, he sensed the presence of the hidden enemy – but unlike the others, he told himself, he longed to face it. To feel the cold supercharged frenzy of battle and the sweet satiation of his killing lust.

He knew he was a killer, had done ever since he butchered his first leviathan calf. Egil had enjoyed the sound the harpoon made as it plunged into flesh. The scent of warm blood had been perfume to his nostrils. Yes, he was a killer and he was proud of it. It did not matter to him whether his prey was a mindless animal, another man or some alien monstrosity. He welcomed the chance of combat. He knew that he would face whatever came like a true warrior and, if necessary, die like a true man.

He hefted his knife, admiring its fine balance, and touched the rune that activated the mono-filament element. Egil knew that it could slice the bonds between actual atoms if he wanted it to. In his secret heart he hoped that he would have a chance to use it. He felt that the true worth of a man was measured in breast-to-breast combat, when the action got close and deadly. Any fool could kill at a distance, with a bolt pistol. Egil liked to look into his foe's eyes when he killed them. He liked to watch the light go out of them.

Egil glared out into the warm dark, daring his foes to appear. In the distance he felt something respond.



SVEN SAW THE strange sneering smile appear on Egil's youthful face and he shuddered. He wondered what was going on. All of his companions seemed to be behaving a little oddly. He wondered whether it was simply the strangeness of the place combined with the feeling of danger that was bringing out hidden facets of their personality or whether there was some strange force at work here.

He could understand it if it were the eerie nature of the place. The deeper they went, the more sinister the place became. The air seemed thick with acrid stench. Long columns of glistening flesh rose from floor to ceiling. Slime dripped from the ceiling to form phosphorescent

puddles in the depressions of the floor. The slow drip-drip-drip kept pace with his own heartbeat. The noise mingled with the gurglings of the vein-pipes and the laboured gasping of the air-valves.

Occasionally, out of the corner of his eye, Sven would catch sight of small scuttling things, moving with the speed of spiders between the patches of shadow. The further the Space Marines proceeded, the more apparent it became that they had disturbed something. It seemed like the whole place was waking from a long period of hibernation.

Hakon gestured for them to be still. Everyone froze in place. The sergeant advanced, moving cautiously towards a patch of darkness. Sven brought his bolt pistol up to cover him, focusing down the sight. As the sergeant filled the cross-hairs it occurred to Sven how easy it would be to kill him. A life was such an easy thing to end. All he would have to do is squeeze the trigger...

Sven shook his head, wondering where the thought had come from. Had something outside tried to influence him or was some long concealed flaw in his own personality come to light. He pushed the thought aside and concentrated on his duty to provide support for Hakon.

The sergeant stood over something, looking down. He kicked it with his foot. A skull rolled into the light. Sven recognised the sloping brow and rows of protruding tusks from his comparative anatomy classes.

'Ork,' he said.

Egil gave a short, barking laugh that sounded harsh and shallow in this alien place. 'This place doesn't belong to Orks,' the Space Wolf sneered.

'No... but maybe they've been here before us,' Hakon said. His expression was grave as he considered the possibility of a new threat from this unexpected quarter.

'It's been dead a long time,' Njal pointed out. 'Maybe there are no more about.'

Sven bent down to examine it, noting the column of snapped vertebrae that

depended from the neck. 'Then the question is: what killed it?'

The Scouts exchanged worried looks.

'Perhaps we should return to the ship,' Njal suggested. 'We've seen enough, surely.'

'No,' Hakon said firmly. 'We've to perform a complete survey.'

'We've come too far to back out,' Egil added fiercely.

'Surely you're not scared, little brother,' Gunnar said. There was a hint of fear in his own voice.

'Enough,' Hakon said. He led them on down the path. His stride was determined and Sven knew that the sergeant was going to see this thing through to the bitter end, whatever it might be.



THE JOKE FROZE on Gunnar's lips as he looked down into the long hallway. Back when he was younger, he had seen the body of a leviathan washed up on the beach. His father's bondsmen had surrounded the great mammal, hacking open the creature and stripping off great flaps of blubber from its rib cage. The stink from the great cauldrons in which they were melting down oil mingled with the corrupt stench of the creature's innards. It rose from the beach to assail his nostrils even atop the cliff on which he stood.

He had gazed down into the thing's guts and seen, naked and exposed, the pulpy hidden workings of its guts. A bondsman had climbed in and was ploughing through the great ropes of the intestine with a knife. His hands and face and beard were smeared with blood and filth.

Looking down from the jaw-like ledge of flesh, the moment returned to him with sudden force. He felt simultaneously like his younger self and like the old fisherman ploughing through the disgusting meat. The full horror of their position rammed itself home in his mind.

They were in the belly of the beast. They had been swallowed like the ancient seafarer Tor, and for them there would be no Terminators to rip them free.

He rubbed at the slime that now coated his armour and fought down an urge to gag. Not for the first time, he wished he were back home in his father's longhouse, safe under his protection and lording it over the villagers.

He knew that was impossible. There was no going back. His father had exiled him for killing young Strybjorn Grimson in that fight. It did not matter that the death had been an accident. He hadn't really meant to throw the boy off the cliff; he had meant merely to frighten him. It did not matter either that his father had only sent him west-over-the-sea to avoid retribution at the hands of Strybjorn's kin, who had refused weregeld for his death. Gunnar still felt bitter about it, even if he hid his bitterness the same way as he hid his unease, behind a smile and a sarcastic joke.

He let his breath hiss out between his teeth; at least his reverie had distracted him from their predicament, trapped within this alien monster. He saw Njal looking at him and he restrained a taunt. It was too easy for him, the son of an upland jarl, to patronise Sven and Njal who were born freemen. He felt guilty about it. They were his battle-brothers, all equal in the eyes of the Emperor. If the Space Wolves had not chosen him after the great contest of arms at Skaggafjord then he would be a simple landless man, less even than a bondsman. He vowed that in the future he would do his best to contain his feeling of superiority, if only the Emperor would protect him this once.

And now he was attempting to bargain with his Lord and Emperor, a demeaning act for both the deity and a Fenris noble. He tried to clear his mind and make a most devout prayer of atonement but when he did so the only thing that sprang to mind was the picture of the dead beast lying on the shore, with the gore-streaked old man burrowing through its filthy innards.

WHAT WAS THAT?' Sven asked in a hurried, panicky whisper, raising his bolt pistol to eye-level, readying it to fire.

'What was what?' Hakon asked. The sergeant looked tired and haggard, as if all the weight of command had suddenly pressed down upon him. He had the abstracted air of a man facing an insoluble problem.

'I thought I heard something.'

The sergeant paused for a moment, then shook his head.

'Sven's right. He did hear something,' Njal chipped in. 'I heard— There it is again!'

They all strained to listen. It was as if a great pump had started in the distance. The sound carried for a long way, seeming to echo down the rib-like arches of the corridors from far off. The sound was like the slow, measured beat of a massive drum. Sven shuddered, suddenly very cold within his ancient armour.

The Scouts stood frozen. The breathing valves moved in time to the beat. The gurgle of liquids through the pipes rose to a rush. A waterfall of viscous fluid tumbled slowly from ledges halfway down the corridor. Steam rose from the stinking pools it created. Shapes seemed to writhe within the flesh of the walls. Sven was reminded of the movement of maggots within rotten meat.

'It's waking up,' Njal said softly, his voice trembling. 'We should go back.'

Egil sniggered. 'Are you a marine or soft-skinned girl? Why should a little noise scare us?'

Sven whirled to confront the berserk. 'Can't you see the changes that are happening? Who knows what's going to occur next.'

'Why's this happening?' Hakon asked. 'Is it because we're here?'

Sven paused to consider. 'Yes, I think so. It's probably reacting to our presence. The whole ship seems to be alive. It's been rousing since we've come aboard. Think of the changes we've seen as we've come deeper. The outside walls were hard as rock. These ones still seem to be living flesh. Maybe we should go back,

wait for reinforcements.'

'No,' Hakon said. 'Let's explore further. We've yet to find anything of real interest.'

He took the lead, leaping lightly over the steaming pools of bile. In the distance Sven thought he could hear a sound much like scuttling, or the clacking of giant pincers. The sound made him think uncomfortably of scorpions. Looking about him he knew the others had heard it too. The sound disappeared, drowned out by the slow thumping of that monstrous heartbeat.

Sven made the sign of the eagle across his chest and tried so hard not to think about the fisherman, Tor, and his sojourn within the innards of leviathan.



NJAL COULD SENSE the mind of the Beast. It was a slow, steady pressure in his head, perceptible as the vessel's heartbeat or the bellows breathing of the life support systems. He felt its oppressive weight bear down on him, adding to the claustrophobic feel of the long, intestinal corridors with their vile yellow floors and tiny digestive nodes whose acid scarred his armoured boots. He sensed the being's ancient might and the sheer, incomprehensible alienness of it.

He was caught in the cross-currents of its thoughts as he was caught within the coils of its body. Sometimes strange hungers and longings flickered through his mind and Njal felt himself roused by alien lusts and desires: flashes of bizarre, inhuman memories, views seen through a myriad infra-red receptors, sounds overheard by organic radio antennae, the incommunicable sight-smell of pheromone analysers.

Nausea had filled him. There were times when he felt human, long minutes in which he doubted his sanity. Then micro-second exposures to the alien impressions rocked his being to the core.

The strangest thing was that the

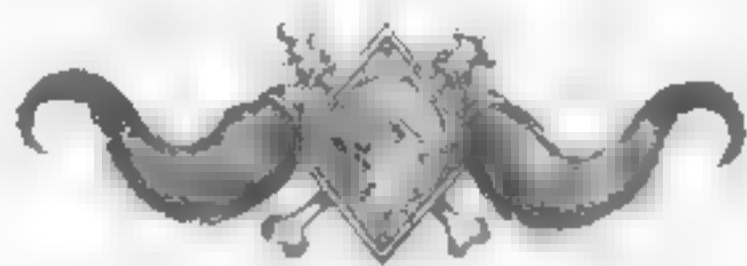
thoughts appeared to be coming from all around him. There seemed to be no fixed source of consciousness, no psychic beacon radiating through the eternal night the way the will of the Emperor was said to be visible as the flare of the Astronomicon.

No, what he was picking up was coming from every direction, from myriad points of consciousness. It was like the chatter of many individuals over the comm-net. Yet there was a pattern, an organising structure to it. He could sense it but could not comprehend it fully. The thoughts simultaneously seemed to belong to one mind and many – as if thousands of telepathic nodes of consciousness surrounding him seemed to make up a single greater mind.

He caught sight of what he suddenly knew was himself through a tiny eyeball high in the corridor ceiling. He scuttled along the ledge, looking down on himself. At the same time he was aware of himself looking up to see the things scuttling in the shadows. He opened his mouth to scream a warning. He saw himself gazing up into the alien darkness, frozen in terror...

Several things happened near-simultaneously. The entity which had been overwhelming him became aware that it was being eavesdropped on and all contact ceased. He was himself once more. The warning left his lips, coming out in a long incoherent shriek in alien words.

And the scuttling things moving along the wall leapt to the attack.



WHEN NJAL SCREAMED, Sven reacted immediately, throwing himself down and rolling along the spongy floor, scanning his surroundings with a quick movement of his head. He caught sight of the segmented black objects descending from the ceiling. Their fall seemed strangely slow in the low gravity.

He lay on his back and braced his bolt pistol in both hands, blasting at the thing springing at him. It reminded him of a cross between a scorpion and a giant termite. It had an armoured, multi-segmented body and great claws. Eight evil eyes glittered in the gloom. Venom dripped from clicking mandibles.

The pistol roared and kicked in his hand. The monster exploded in front of him as the shells slammed into its alien body. Yellow phosphorous light limned its corpse as gobbets of meat were thrown everywhere by the explosion. He felt wetness on the back of his neck. At first he thought it was his target's blood then he realised it was fluid pumping from tiny broken capillaries in the fleshy floor. He scrambled to his feet, seeking another target.

The sergeant stood as still as a statue. His whole form flickered with the light from his blazing pistol. With every shot, an alien monster was destroyed.

'Fire at will,' Hakon shouted. 'Choose your targets carefully. Don't let them get too close.'

Sven sighted on a thing that moved across the floor like a great manta ray, its body undulating with every bump and depression in the carpet of alien flesh. His mind was paralysed with fear but his body seemed to respond like some mechanical automaton. The long hours of training where he repeated every combat action until it was ingrained like habit had paid off.

Without thinking he pulled the trigger and as his target flew apart, he re-aimed and fired, re-aimed and fired. The howl of bolt pistol fire filled the air as his companions did the same.

Nearby Egil crouched in the slime, a feral snarl revealing his elongated incisors. The blue flare of his pistol flickered in the gloom. The light-trails of his bolter shells blazed towards their targets. The creepers were blown asunder, their shells cracked; burning meat oozed from within. Egil held his knife ready in his left hand in case any got too close; he would be ready to tear them to pieces.

Gunnar wheeled from the hip, his heavy bolter swivelling with him. His hand pumped furiously on the trigger mechanism. Short controlled bursts stitched across the oncoming tide of creepers, tearing them in two.

Only Njal stood frozen, a look of horror on his face. As Sven watched one of the aliens reached his face, claw extended, ready to snap into his neck. Quickly, heart racing Sven drew a bead and fired. The claw of the creeper was torn off, black blood splattered Njal's face. He shook his pale face and moved like a man waking from a trance. Sven felt hundreds of tiny legs tickle his neck, and a weight descended on his back. He wheeled and found himself staring into the tiny eyes of one of the monsters.

Filled with panic and horror he thrust it back one armed, bludgeoning it across the head with the barrel of his pistol. There was a sickening crunch as he broke its armour. A foul spray burned his flesh.

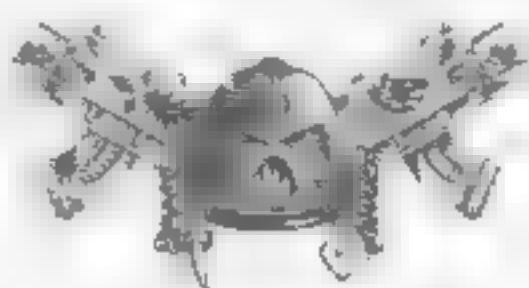
The memory of those small legs on his flesh, so like those of a centipede made him shudder. He flicked out his knife activating it and as the creature rushed at him, rearing to use its claws, he slashed it across the chest horizontally. Then, with a backhand sweep, he cut it again vertically. Its warm innards sprayed out uncontrollably, drenching him.

Sven looked around. The wave of attackers seemed to have broken on the Space Marines' defence. All of the Scouts remained upright and seemingly unscathed.

'Any injuries?' Sergeant Hakon asked. Everyone shook their head. Sven noticed uneasily the fixed, hungry grin on Egil's face – and the pale horror on Njal's.

'Very well. We've seen enough. I think it's time to return.'

Thankfully, the Scouts agreed. Behind them things moved in the darkness.



EGIL STRODE forward confidently. This was more like it! No more skulking round in the darkness. No more waiting for the hammer to fall. Now he had a foe to face and what more could any true Space Wolf ask for? The only flaw was that they were heading in the wrong direction. Hakon should be leading them deeper into the alien vessel, towards the source of the evil that polluted it.

He paused at the junction, noting how unusual, near-spherical objects were moving through the vein-pipes in the wall. They looked for all the world like eggs that had been swallowed by a snake. Whatever new threat they represented, Egil welcomed it. Now was his chance to show his bravery, to prove his worth as a Space Marine.

The berserker fury burned within him, a dim coal ready to fanned into bright flame. He clutched his knife tightly, feeling the inset runes even through the thick stuff of his gauntlet. He longed to plunge it into the breast of a foe. Killing the creepers had only whetted his appetite for bloodletting. Now he wanted worthier enemies for his blade to taste.

To the right, down the pale, flesh-walled corridor Egil picked up a sound. It sounded like the thrashing of something trapped. He moved to investigate, hoping that some new foe was almost upon him. As he passed, he slashed at the tiny arteries lacing the wall and laughed as black fluid ran down the central channel of his blade. Excitement filled him. Now he was truly alive, perched on the razor-edge between life and death. This was the place for a true warrior.

+Egil, where are you going? You are not following the beacon-path!+ Hakon's voice sounded worried, even through the distortion of the comm-net.

+There's something moving down here. I'm moving to secure the flank.+

+Hold your position. We'll send someone to support you.+

Egil smiled... and bounced his gauntleted palm against the comm-net

circlet: +Say again. I can't hear you. There appears to be some comm-net distortion.+

He ignored the sergeant's orders just as he ignored the massive sphincter door closing behind him. He stood in a great chamber. The ceiling was as high as that of the great cathedral in the Fortress among the glaciers. It was supported by immense, rib-like arches that met high overhead, where the bone of each rib emerged from the pink flesh. Great vein-pipes ran all around them, tangled into tight pleats. At the far end of the chamber was a huge mass of flesh that looked like a massive kidney, suspended by dozens of pumping, vein-like tubes, each thicker than Egil's leg.

Great blisters, twice the height of a man, covered the walls. The skin around them seemed near-translucent, like the shed skin of a snake. Within each, a massive figure seemed to struggle and squirm. There was a sound like tearing as whatever was within started to loosen its bonds.

Even as Egil watched, eyes as wide as saucers, one of the massive blisters split and from it something emerged, like a chicken new-born from an egg. It uncoiled rising unsteadily to its full height and it let out a triumphant scream that sent mucous blasting outward from its throat.

It looked almost like a dinosaur, one of the primeval sea-dragons who dwelled in the warmer seas around Fenris' equator. Its head was large and bulged back, its horny carapace protecting a hefty brain case. Its ribs seemed to be outside its body, like the exo-skeleton of an insect, and its internal organs were clearly visible. Egil could see its lungs pulse with breath and its heart beating underneath them.

It had four muscular arms, two of which terminated in long claws; the other pair of clutched a long weapon that looked like a strange rifle. Its long legs ended in hoofs and raised it to over twice Egil's height. A lengthy stinger lay curled between its legs. The shape of the creature's structure reminded the Scout

of the ship. It was all long curves and exposed innards. It reminded him of pictures he had seen of Genestealers, but from memories of Archivum pictures, he recognised it as something even worse.

'Tyranid,' he breathed, barely daring to pronounce the word. 'We're in a Tyranid ship.'

As he spoke the words into the comm net, the thing swung the alien gun to bear on him. From all around there was the sound of other blisters ripping.



EGIL'S WORDS SENT a paralysing chill through Sven. He recalled studying the aliens in the archives of the order. The Space Wolves had come late to the campaign against Hive-Fleet Behemoth and the records of the action had been scanty.

A company of assault troops had taken part in the ground action on Calth IV, facing the giant monsters and their legions of hideously mutated bio-killers. Afterwards, the Tyranids had swiftly decomposed as mortuary micro-organisms devoured their bodies, preventing proper forensic analysis.

Most of what the archives contained was little more than speculation. The theory was that the Tyranids were an immeasurably old, extra-galactic race; they drifted from system to system via a network of Warp gates. They searched for new races to conquer and consume, breaking down their gene-runes to create their terrifying bio-engineered horrors.

The Tyranids used bio-technology for every conceivable purpose. They had muscle-engined living chariots to carry them into battle. Their guns seemed to consist of clusters of symbiotic organisms that fired hard-shelled organic bullets or acids. Their starships were vast, living creatures, true space-going leviathans that swamed the unknowable currents of the Warp.

They had an organised, powerful society, most of which worked on principles incomprehensible to or indecipherable by Imperial scholars. Hive-Fleet Behemoth had been totally inimical to mankind. It devastated an entire sector in its sweep through the galaxy. It had shredded worlds. Legions of its creature had dropped on plague-weakened planets, carrying entire populations into the maw of the motherships, never to be seen again. They had dropped asteroids on some worlds, and brought many others to their knees with deadly biological contaminations.

Some, more superstitious peoples had turned from the worship of the Emperor and abased themselves before the image of Behemoth. In the time of anarchy that the Hive-Fleet brought with it, chaotic cults had gained power promising salvation from a threat against which the Imperium seemed powerless. Trade had been disrupted, nests of Genestealers had been uncovered. A new Dark Age seemed about to fall.

It had taken a full military mobilisation of the Imperium to stop Hive-Fleet Behemoth. More than Orks, more than Eldar, the Tyranids were the most dangerous threat that humanity faced outside of the Eye of Terror. And even then, Sven speculated, another Behemoth might match even the threat of Chaos. He wondered whether this ship were perhaps some remnant of Behemoth, a straggler cut off from the main Hive-Fleet that had drifted powerless through space for centuries until the crew of the *Spiritus Sancti* had disturbed it. He prayed to the Emperor that this was the case.

The alternative – that this was the out-
rider of a new Hive-Fleet, a successor to Behemoth – was just too dreadful to contemplate.



THROWING HIMSELF to one side, Egil blasted the newly-hatched Tyranid warrior. His bolter flared in his hand but his shot went wild. The gun in the Tyranid's claws gave out a hideous grinding sound. The sacs at its base pulsed and then a stream of shrapnel and steaming acid belched forth. A terrible acrid stench filled the air. Something burned Egil's cheek as he dove aside. He gritted his teeth against the searing pain and rolled behind one of the nodes of cartilage protruding from the floor.

The ammunition warning rune of his pistol glowed red. He fumbled in his belt pouch for another clip. While he did so the alien monster lumbered closer. He could hear its hoof-beats and its slow, laboured breathing coming nearer and nearer. In his efforts he ignored the frantic comm-net chatter of his fellow Space Wolves.

His fingers were covered in mucous from the broken capillaries on the floor and the clip slid free. He grabbed it before it hit the floor and tried to ram it home. The shadow of the Tyranid fell upon him. He felt its warm breath on his neck. Frantically he twisted to bring his bolter to bear. He glared up into blank, pupil-less eyes. The thing's dinosaur-like head seemed to smile as it pointed its weapon towards him.

Egil looked upon the face of death and grinned back.



THE SCOUTS RACED down the corridor towards Egil's last known position. Sven's heartbeat was hammering in his ears, more from fear than exertion. He skipped over a pool of slime and saw the sphincter door ahead. He dreaded to think what lay beyond it. All of his childhood nightmares concerning monsters seemed to be coming true. He felt that if he had one more shock he would most likely go completely mad.

'Brother Egil, report! Report, damn you!' Sergeant Hakon was bellowing. 'What is your situation. Come in!'

Sven strained to hear any response. There was none. The Space Marines now stood by the door. They were ready to enter.

'Njal, watch the way we came, in case anything comes behind us! Gunnar, cover us! Sven, we're going in! Get ready. When I say the word, open the door!' Hakon's orders were crisp and clear. Sven nodded to show he understood. He swallowed again and again; his mouth felt so dry he thought he might choke at any moment.

'Go!' Hakon shouted and Sven stroked the bulbous protrusion that would open the door.

The scene that greeted them was a vision from Hell. From blisters in the walls of the vast, fleshy chamber, dozens of giant monsters were hatching, each clutching an obscene-looking weapon. Some carried two swords of bone, others long alien guns. The Tyranids themselves looked as if they didn't need weapons. They were huge and their fighting claws looked deadly.

Egil lay behind a mound of flesh on the floor. His face had been horribly burned by acid, revealing bone and some scorched muscle. Near him lay a dead Tyranid. Its rib-cage had been torn open by the explosive blast of a bolt shell. Egil looked at them and gave a thumbs-up sign.

'Ghost of Russ!' Gunnar breathed.

'Fire at will,' Hakon shouted.

Sven sighted on a newly-hatching monstrosity. It stood, shaking the slime of its glittering carapace. He took careful aim and put a bolter shell through its head. The thing toppled like a felled tree. Sven heard Gunnar working the pump action of his heavy weapon and behind him the whole vast chamber was illuminated by the incandescent blast of a Hellfire shell. Shadows danced around the bony ridges. Two Tyranids caught fire, seeming to perform a horrific dance of death in their final agonies.

Gunnar worked the Hellfire action repeatedly, laying a carpet of fire between the Tyranids and Egil.

'Come on, let's get him!' Hakon ordered, setting off across the chamber, bolter spraying all around him. Sven raced after him. When he reached them, the sergeant had already raised Egil to his feet and was offering him support. Egil shook him off.

'Leave me alone! When I cannot stand on my own two feet it will be time to set me on my funeral pyre.' There was a wild, dangerous look in the berserk's eyes. He seemed half-crazed with pain and murder-lust. He reeled on his feet but stayed upright. 'I'm alright. It will take more than a little acid to finish me.'

Through the dying flames of the Hellfire curtain loomed the mighty figure of a Tyranid warrior, a bio-sword held in each claw. The blades were surrounded by a sickly greenish light that reminded Sven of a festering wound. It raised its blades like scythes to cut down its chosen prey.

'Watch out!' Sven shouted leaping forward, swinging his knife left-handed. Its blade cut deeply into the Tyranid, cleaving through bone and skin. Sven felt his hand and blade imbed themselves in the Tyranid's alien flesh. He felt the soft clammy pressure of the thing's innards on his hand. As he withdrew his blade there was a vile sucking sound.

'Fall back!' Sven tugged Egil towards the door. For a moment the acid-burned man stood looking at the scene of the battle and Sven thought he wasn't going to come. Then Egil turned and loped to the door.

There was a hiss as the sphincter sealed behind them. Egil let out a horrible laugh. The sound seemed to bubble out from his ruined cheek. 'We showed them who the masters were,' he crowed.

Sven kept silent, wondering how many other such nightmarish hatcheries there were.

WHILE THE BATTLE raged, Njal fought down a growing feeling of panic. The sense of the alien presence had returned to his mind, a pressure as constant and morale-sapping as the unceasing, metronome-regular pulse of the distant heart. This time he sensed the alien was being more subtle. It sought to undermine his resolve. It saw him as the weak link in the squad.

And he feared that it was correct.

He felt the surge of its mighty alien mind about him, each thought emanating from a single creature, one small brain that housed a component of the group-mind.

It was hopeless, he knew. Why fight it? His premonition would come true, as it always did. Would it not be easier to simply give up? At least that would end the waiting and the fear. Why not simply lay down his weapon and welcome the inevitable? It was hopeless; he and his brethren could never escape from within the beast. It was a living world and everything in it would be aligned against them. Nothing could escape.

Even as Njal tried to dismiss these thoughts as coming from an inimical, external source, another idea filtered into his confused brain. Perhaps the group-mind might even spare them, welcome them as a slave-race, let them live and adapt them to dwelling within the breast of the Hive-Fleet. Then he would be safe, comfortable, welcome.

Had he not been lonely all of his life? Apart from the people around him, misunderstood, separate? If he joined the group-mind he need never be alone again. He would be part of a greater whole, a new and essential component to be sent forth and deal with other humans. The Hive-Fleet would nurture and protect him, make him its own. The day of humankind was done. A new order was rising in the Universe. He could be a part of it, if he wished.

At first, Njal tried to dismiss the thoughts as fantasies created by his fear-crazed mind but as they continued he understood that he was not deluded. He was in touch with the Hivemind and that

the offer was perfectly sincere.

He was tempted. He did feel isolated and alone and had done all his life. He did not want to die, even though he knew that this was a blasphemy against his faith. A true marine would choose death over dishonour or betrayal without thinking. The Hivemind was offering him not only a chance to live and be part of its community but perhaps even a form of immortality within itself.

For a moment he allowed himself the luxury of succumbing to temptation – then he stepped back from the brink.

He realised that he wanted to remain apart, to be himself. The loneliness that his gift brought was like the gift itself: it made him who he was. It made him unique and he wanted that more than anything. His sense of self made him human, and made him alive. If he submerged it within something else he, the unique being, would cease to be as surely as if he had died.

More than that, being a Space Marine was part of his identity too. They had made him who he was. He was surprised to find that he did accept their way. He had spent too much time with his companions to betray them. Shared hardship and shared danger had forged bonds between them that sometimes, when he wanted it, caused his isolation to fade. They were his community. They allowed him to be himself and yet part of something greater.

For a second, though, he saw a parallel between the Hive-Fleet and his Chapter. The Chapter was, in its own way, a living thing. Its flesh was the men who served it. Its traditions and obligations were its memories and its mind. It, too, demanded a loyalty and a submission of self – but it was of a different order to what the Tyranid wanted. He could live with that.

As if sensing his rejection of it, he sensed the presence of the Hivemind withdraw. He stood alone, in an ominously empty corridor, while behind him battle raged.

SVEN FINISHED spraying Egil's face with field dressing. He took a deep breath, revelling in the cool disinfectant tang of the stuff, a momentary release from the revolting stink of the place. He hoped that the antiseptic synthetic flesh would be enough to keep the berserk going till he could be got to an Apothecarion.

Egil certainly seemed to think so. He lurched to his feet, beat on his huge chest with one fist and said, 'Ready!'

Hakon surveyed Sven's work critically. 'It'll do.'

Sven glanced at Njal. He was worried about his friend. Since this expedition had started he had seemed more and more distracted. Sven hoped that he had not crumbled under the strain of combat.

Gunnar finished checking his weapon and worked the loading action of the weapon. It clicked loudly. He grinned from ear to ear, unnaturally jubilant.

'We're still alive. We showed them what Space Wolves can do, right enough.'

'We're not free of this place yet, lad,' Hakon said evenly. 'We've still got to follow the beacons home.'

'If we meet any more they'll taste my knife,' Egil sneered. Gunnar nodded emphatically and grinned again. The relief of surviving his first real combat was obviously getting to him, Sven thought.

'Don't be so cocky,' Hakon said. 'We beat a few half-awake monsters who'd been in suspended animation for only Russ knows how long. The next batch will be ready for us. We'd best move fast.'

His calm, commanding tone sobered the mood of all of the Scouts except Egil. He continued grinning maniacally. 'Bring them on,' he muttered happily. 'Bring them on.'



GUNNAR WAS HAPPY, happier than he could ever remember being. His breath sang within him. Every heartbeat was a drumbeat of triumph. He was still alive.

His weapon felt light in his grip. He felt like kissing it. He had been so afraid when he saw the monsters but he had overcome his fear. He had kept firing and he had killed them before they could kill him or his companions.

For the very first time, he knew the thrill of triumph in real combat. There had been nothing accidental about the deaths he had caused. He had meant to kill the alien monstrosities. It had been either their lives or his. He felt no guilt about it, just a sweet sense of release and relief. The waiting was over. It had been the worst part. Sneaking down these loathsome, stinking corridors not knowing what was round the next bend. He had not realised how much the tension had played on his nerves, on all their nerves.

Now he knew what they faced and it was horrible. But now he could put a picture to the horror. It was not as frightening as the ghastly phantoms his imagination had populated the place with, nor ever would be again. They were mortal. They could die, just like any other living thing.

He felt vindicated. He knew that his action had saved the lives of his comrades. His covering fire had let the sergeant and Sven save Egil. It was the most important thing he had ever done, saving the lives of his friends. All his ambivalent feelings towards them had melted away. He knew that they were true brothers, relying on each other for their very lives in this hellish place. In the face of the awful alien menace of the Tyranids, all men were brothers. Petty differences over race or class or colour meant nothing.

He smiled happily. Having faced death, he felt truly alive. He was glad simply to be able to draw another breath, see another stretch of corridor, feel the distance back to their own ship dwindle under his booted stride. He had never

truly appreciated what a wonder it was to simply be.

Not even the ominous change in the beat of the distant heart or the scuttling sound in the distance could break into his mood of good cheer.



SVEN BRACED HIMSELF for another attack. Something was closing in. He could hear regular, padded footfalls on the fleshy floor behind him. He turned to look back – and saw something ducking slowly back into cover behind him.

He took a snap-shot but the shell slewed into the wall and exploded, sending gobbets of flesh everywhere. Ichor oozed from small broken blood vessels. The thing moved back into view. Sven saw it was small and dark-skinned, with six limbs – a Termagant. It slowly raised its slime-dripping bio-weapon at him. He took careful aim and pumped a shell into its chest. The thing reeled backwards, squealing and scrabbling.

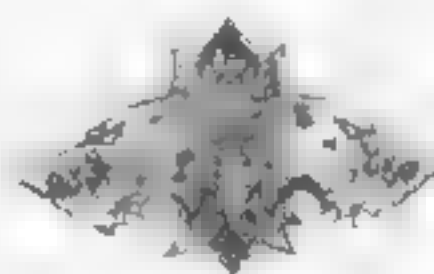
Sven wondered if these were newly-awakened creatures, summoned forth to deal with the human trespassers. He shrugged the thought away and shot it again. His bolt burst through its target and out of the Termagant's head, sending jelly-like bits of brain everywhere.

More Termagants moved slowly into view from the shadows. From behind Sven, his battle brothers' fire erupted into the advancing group. Sven fired again but the red 'empty' warning rune on his bolt pistol flickered and he realised he was out of shells. Caught in the crossfire between his own side and the oncoming Termagants he threw himself flat to reload.

Shells whizzed all around him, lighting the gloom with their firework contrails. The roar of small arms echoed down the corridor, reverberating in the small space until it was deafening. As he

slotted the new clip smoothly into place Sven wondered about how the Termagants had got there. Were they captives taken as slaves on some alien world or were they some newly-evolved product of this vile craft? He thought the latter more likely. But how did that explain the Ork skull they had found earlier?

Once more he opened fire, feeling the heavy bolt pistol kick in his hand with a kind of grim satisfaction. The withering fire of the Space Marines soon drove the Termagants back into concealment. Sven knew they would be back though and wondered how many other nasty surprises the alien ship had in store.



NJAL TOOK POINT. He was happy to lead the way back. Having resisted the temptation to succumb to the Hivemind he felt so much stronger. His premonition of doom had receded. Perhaps, just this once, he would be proved wrong.

Slowly he picked his way along the slime-covered floors, avoiding the strange circular valves at his feet. He pointed downward to indicate his fellow Scouts should do the same. He heard them move to one side in response to his instruction and was glad. They were almost half-way to the boarding torpedo. Soon they could rest once more on the *Spiritus Sancti* and let Hauptman blow this alien nest to kingdom come.

Relief made him careless. He slid on the slippery floor and tumbled forward on top of one of the circles. He put his hand down to steady him and the whole floor seemed to give way. He tumbled into darkness, feeling the walls squash shut round him. He reached back up though the valve to grab the edge and felt Sergeant Hakon's strong hand grasp his. Relief filled him. The sergeant could lift him back into the light.

The walls around him began to contract and then expand. He felt their

glistening sides press on him. He was reminded of a man swallowing – and he was the tasty morsel. As a mindless panic rose within him, he tried to pull himself up frantically. Sergeant Hakon attempted to aid him. Njal felt him strain against the downward pull of the tunnel-throat. For a moment he was pulled upwards... then he felt the sergeant's grip falter and slip on his slime-covered gauntlet.

'No,' he screamed as he was sucked downward into the darkness. When the motion ceased he was in corrosive liquid. He could sense it eating away at the ceramite of his armour. One by one, the red emergency icons on his sleeve came on. Bathed in the eerie light from their useless warnings, he felt the warm digestive acid began to eat his flesh and etch his bones. As his life faded he seemed to hear the gloating though of the Hivemind.

One way or another you will become part of me, it said.



NO. HE'S GONE There's nothing you can do!' Sven felt Sergeant Hakon's hand on his shoulder pulling him away from the valve. He stopped beating futilely on it with his fist and prepared to blast it.

'Brother Sergeant Hakon is right,' he heard Gunnar say. 'There's nothing we can do. Nothing. Njal is gone and we'll be joining him if we don't move.'

Slowly sanity started to percolate into Sven's mind. His friend was gone, never to return. He was dead. The thought had such a terrible finality to it. Sven shut his eyes and gave out the terrible death-howl of his order. The feral wolf-cry echoed down the corridors and was swallowed. The distant heartbeat of the ship continued undisturbed.

'There will be time to grieve later,' Hakon said gently. 'Now we must return to the ship.'

'Don't worry,' Egil said, his eyes glittering with murder-lust. 'He will be

avenged. I swear it.'

Sven nodded and pulled himself to his feet. He gripped his pistol firmly in one hand and his knife in the other. He crossed them across his chest in the ritual position and said a brief prayer to the Emperor for the soul of his battle brother. Then he followed the others on the long path back to the boarding torpedo.



SERGEANT HAKON was next to die. The thing uncoiling from the air-vent got him. A four-armed, fanged and clawed horror with hypnotic eyes tore his head off before he could even swing his chainsword.

Egil didn't wait for his turn. He launched himself at it, aiming his knife squarely at its back. The thing turned with eye-blurring speed and batted him aside effortlessly with one might hand. He felt ribs crack under the force of the blow. Even his ceramite breastplate did not protect him. If it had cut him with its pincer, Egil knew he would have died. He did not care. A red haze was upon him. He ignored the pain, gathered his legs beneath him and prepared to spring again.

'Genestealer,' he heard Sven mutter. 'By Russ, is there no end to the horrors in this place?'

A red haze fell over Egil's vision. He howled his warcry and leapt. He knew he had made a mistake when the thing's claw swept up like a scythe. He knew he was about to receive a disembowelling stroke and he welcomed it with open eyes.

The stroke never fell.

Sven shot the Genestealer twice in the head. It reeled backward under the impact. Shrieking with frustrated bloodlust, Egil tore it to shreds with his knife.

Behind him he heard Sven mutter, 'Two down. Three to go.'

ICAN'T BELIEVE the sergeant is dead,' Gunnar said. He held a Hellfire shell almost negligently in one hand. 'I mean, him and Njal both gone. It's— I—'

'Believe it,' Sven told him firmly. He felt a growing coldness in his heart. He was numb. He seemed to have gone beyond pain, beyond any feeling at all. All he felt was a growing hatred for his enemies and a cold determination to survive and present his report to the Imperium. It was the only way he could think of to give the deaths of his companions any meaning.

He studied the other two, trying to gauge how much use they would be. Egil looked gaunt and evil; a strange light was in his eyes and his loping stride suggested a blood-maddened beast. There was a coiled ferocity within the berserker just waiting to be unleashed. Sven knew that he could be counted on to fight — but could he be trusted to make a sensible decision?

Gunnar's mood seemed to have swung from near-insane cheerfulness to depressive gloom. He looked bewildered by the sudden deaths of his comrades. He seemed unable to come to terms with the fact they had died so suddenly.

Sven coldly assessed their chances and knew it was up to him to take charge. He was the only one who seemed capable of rational decision making. 'Right. We'd better go,' he said.

'But what about Hakon's body? We can't just leave it here.'

'He's dead, Gunnar. There's no point in encumbering ourselves with a corpse. I'll cut the gene-seed from him, for his successor. He won't go unremembered. I swear it.'

Fitting action to words, he set about reclaiming the Sergeant's gene-seed, the control mechanism that transformed him into a Space Marine. It was gory work and soon Hakon's blood mingled with that of the enemy on Sven's knife.



THEY NEARLY made it. The Tyranid ambushed them from behind the branches of a carcinoma tree. Sven leapt backward as acid spurted over the ground where he had stood. The shrapnel from the monster's vile living weapon gouged across his cheek, drawing blood. He ignored the notch torn from his ear and took aim at the monster. It lurched back into cover as Sven's shots raked its cover.

'Gunnar, burn that thing!' he yelled, but Gunnar stood stock still, not loading his weapon, not doing anything.

'More coming behind us,' Egil roared. Sven cursed. He considered haranguing Gunnar but wasn't sure it would do any good. Instead he unclipped a grenade and lobbed it at the Tyranid. The explosion sent the thing reeling into the open. Gunnar snapped out of his immobility and sent a blast of automatic fire dancing across its chest. Its top half suddenly separated from its legs, the Tyranid collapsed, screaming.

Sven risked a backwards glance. A line of Tyranids was bounding up the corridor towards them. Their gait seemed slow and awkward but they covered the ground at a tremendous rate. Sven knew that the three of them could not outrun the monsters. He moved forward anyway. Perhaps they could make a last stand behind the carcinoma tree.

'Follow me,' he shouted and leapt forward into cover. Gunnar and Egil swiftly followed. The distant pounding of the ship's heart sounded as loud as thunder now and the air was thick with the acidic stench of Tyranid blood. Sven sighted on the leading Tyranid and fired. It pained him to have come so near to escape and to fail at the last. His shot glanced off its armoured hide. He aimed at the head.

'Gunnar. Use the Hellfire!' he shouted.

'I can't — the mechanism's jammed!' Gunnar yelled back.

Sven cursed. A spray of shots from the Tyranid's weapon sent him ducking back into cover, the memory of claw-armed monstrosities leaping towards them burned into his mind. There were just too many of them. The Scouts were doomed.

'You two – get out of here!' yelled Egil. 'I'll hold them off.'

'It's certain death, man.'

'Don't argue! Just do it!'

Sven swiftly weighed things up in his racing mind. He could stay here and die – or he could save the sergeant's gene-seed, himself and another Space Marine. The balance had already been tipped; there was no choice.'

'Goodbye,' he said, rushing towards the last beacon, the one belonging to the boarding torpedo.

'Farewell, landsman,' he heard Egil say. 'I'll show you what makes a true Space Wolf.'



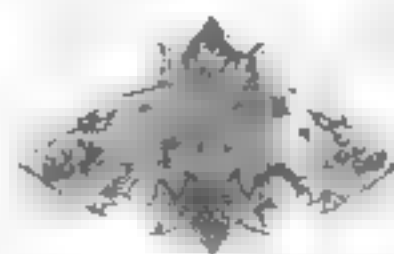
EGIL HOWLED his laughter and fired again. He leapt to his feet and pumped the trigger of his pistol, blasting shots wildly at the Tyranids. Their advance halted in the face of the withering fire. The Space Wolf Scout unclipped a grenade and lobbed it at them. They ducked back behind a sphincter-door. The grenade exploded against it. The door buckled but didn't give.

Suddenly it was quiet. Egil risked a glance back over his shoulder towards where Sven and Gunnar had vanished. Briefly he considered following them. Yet he couldn't guarantee that the Tyranids wouldn't follow him and overtake him. Better to keep them pinned down.

He caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. The Tyranids had circled round and entered the chamber from the other side. Good, Egil thought, feeling the killing rage build within him. More enemies to take to Hell with him.

The Tyranids rushed at him. He swung his pistol round but a blast from an organic gun tore into his arm, ripping the bolter from his grasp and shredding his flesh to the bone. He fought to keep from blacking out as unquenchable agony seared him. He gripped his knife tight and howled with rage. He lurched to his feet and ran towards them.

'I'll kill you! I'll kill you all!' he shouted, blood-specked froth staining his lips. The last thing he saw was the monster take careful, direct aim at him. He pulled back his knife to throw.



THE SOUND of fighting stopped. Sven bundled Gunnar into the torpedo, slammed the hatch shut and hit the control icon.

As the alien craft shrank smaller and smaller in the flickering green view-screen, Sven commended Egil's soul to the Emperor. He noticed that Gunnar was weeping. Whether it was from sorrow or relief, Sven could not tell.



HAUPTMAN WATCHED as the plasma-bombs raked the Tyranid craft from end to end. Within scant moments the organic ship was utterly destroyed. As Hauptman stared in rapt fascination, the solar wings so recently unfurled tore off and drifted into space. The men in the *Spiritus Sancti's* turrets used them for target practice. He saw the look of satisfaction on Sven's face as he watched the alien artefact being cleansed.

'Well,' he said. 'I think that ends that.'

'I think not,' Chandara the Astropath said from next to the pair of them, pale faced and drawn. 'Before it died, it sent out a signal of enormous psychic power. It was tightly focused in the direction of the Magellanic Cloud but it was so powerful that I picked up its overspill.'

'It was a signal, Shipmaster. It was summoning something. Something big.'

An appalled hush fell over the steering chapel of the *Spiritus Sancti*.

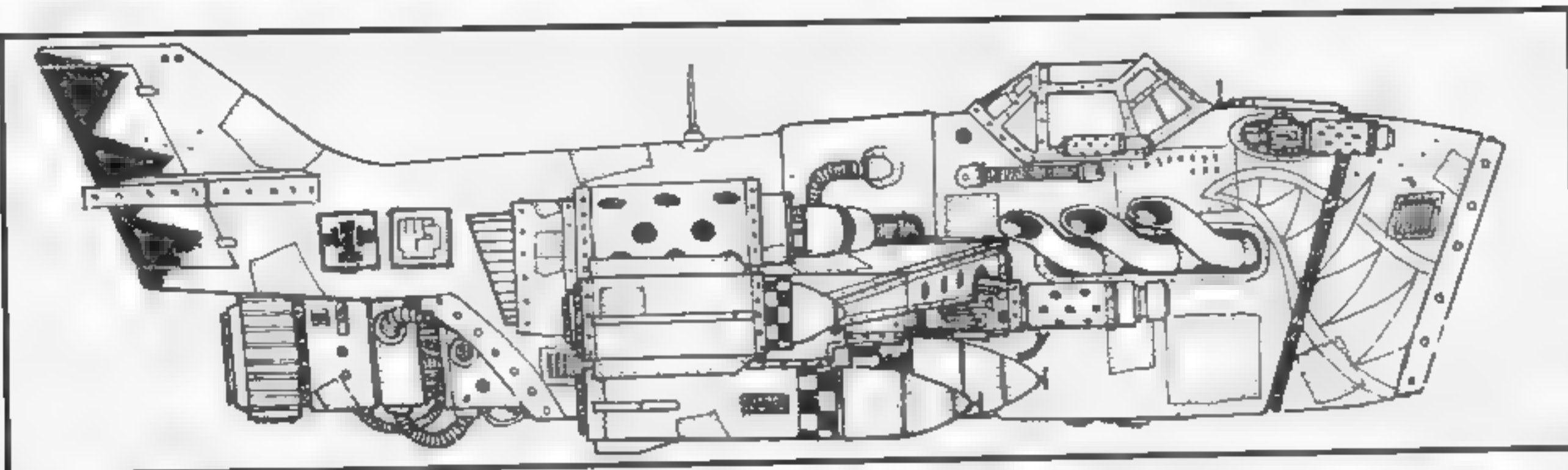
Sven looked down at the gene-seed in his hand. He swore to be worthy of his dead comrades. If war with the Tyranids was coming, he was ready to fight. ●

DEFF SKWADRON



The glorious Fighta-Bommerz of Deff Skwadron take to the skies in defence of their Space-Hull against an attack by the cursed human Raptor Squadron.





ORK FIGHTA-BOMMER

As flown by
Kommanda Uzgob,
aka "Maverork"

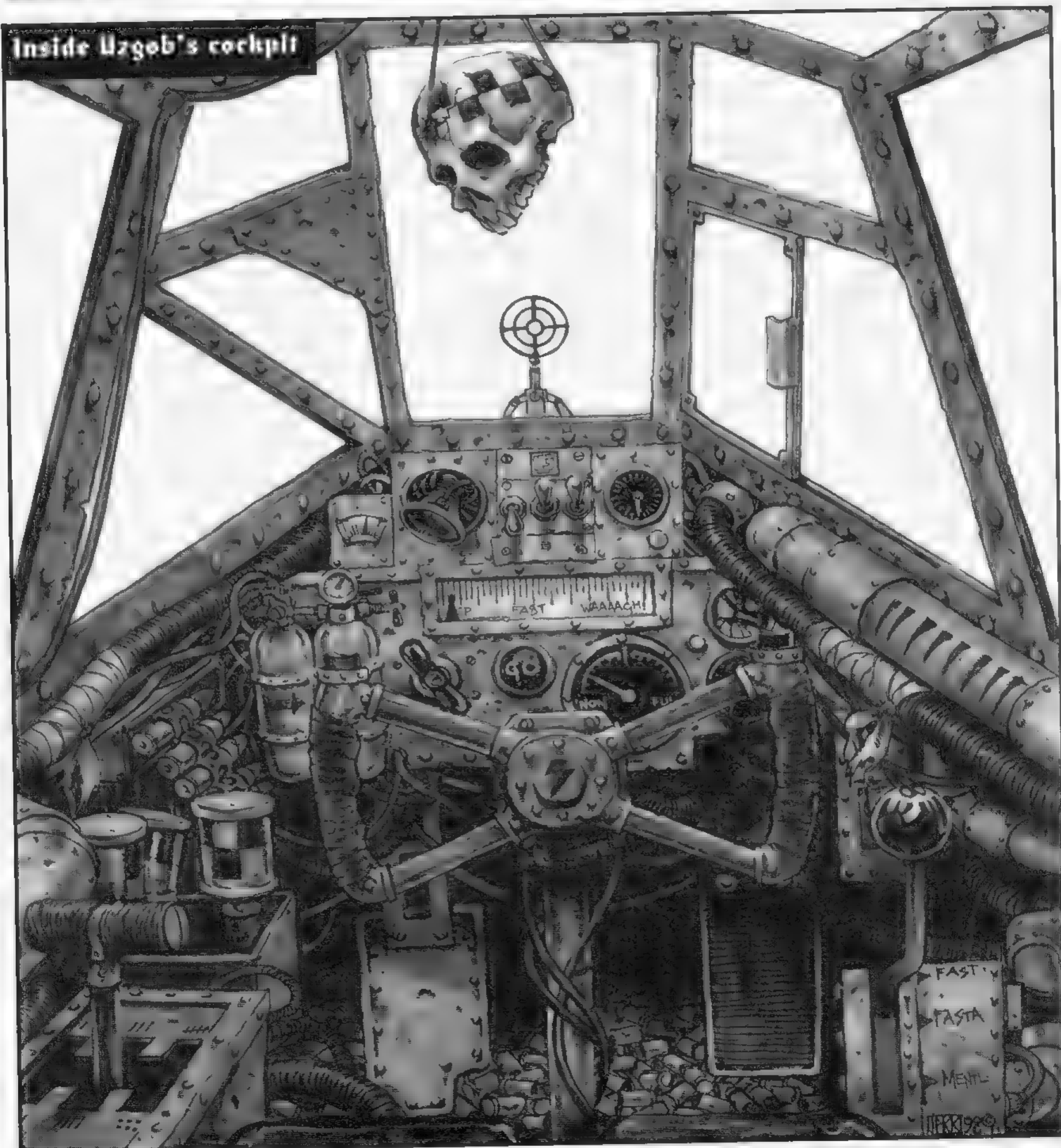
CREW: 1 Ork Pilot
DIMENSIONS: 110 ft long
170 ft wingspan
WEIGHT: 78 tons unladen
RANGE: 1800 km approx.

FUEL TYPE: Unknown
ARMAMENT: 2 nose-mounted heavy
cannons
2-4 wing-mounted heavy cannons
2-4 air-to-air rockets

PAYLOAD: 6000 lbs of wing-drops

*Individual craft may vary widely
from the sample above.*

Inside Uzgob's cockpit





DEFF SKWADRON - SERVIS REKORD

KOMMANDA UZCOB "MAUARORK": Flown 52 missions, 89 confirmed kills, 14 dogfight victories. Shot down twice. Favourite manoeuvre: 'Comin' out of da sun – sneaky!'

RAZNUTS "DA GOOSE": Flown 31 missions, 27 confirmed kills (219 unconfirmed), 2 dogfight victories. Never shot down. Favourite manoeuvre: triple-axel Immelmann stall-turn with salko and dismount (often claimed, but never in front of witnesses).

GORTHUNK "KILLBOY": Flown 34 missions, 66 confirmed kills, 10 dogfight victories. Shot down 14 times. Favourite manoeuvre: flying plane into target.

NB: Kills tally includes only ground targets, rear-area support personnel, refuelling and supply vehicles, also ground staff (enemy *and* friendly), or hard points such as ground-to-air defence sites, bunkers, bridges, hillsides, huts, munitions dumps, Ork stockades, trees, etc. Dogfight tallies include aerial targets shot down.



DA THUG

RAZNUTS "DA GOOSE"

DA MANIK

GORTHUNK "KILLBOY"

DA BOSS

UZCOB "MAUARORK"



Dear Inferno!

Not only is *Inferno!* a totally ace comic book, but it has provided our gaming group with some brilliant ideas for scenarios and role-playing situations, and for us it is the cherry on the cake and we can't wait for the next issue.

Mark Tomlinson, Peterborough

Dear Inferno!

I would really like to see a comic strip based on Orks and Gobbos. I also think there should be an American-based *Inferno!* (no offence, but it is a little hard to figure out what you English people are saying).

Matt Davidson, Hoverford, PA, USA

Dear Inferno!

The concept is superb. Keep publishing high quality writing and art and I'm sure your readership will expand beyond the gamers. So far all the various stories have inspired me to continue pursuing the GW hobby.

Anthony Morgan, Surrey

Dear Inferno!

I am writing to ask you not to include a letters page in your magazine. *Inferno!* is, correct me if I'm wrong, a collection of 'Tales of Fantasy and Adventure'. What is the point of a letters page in a collection of short stories? It is simply a waste of space that could be used to put something more relevant on! Leave letters to *White Dwarf* and the *Citadel Journal*.

Robin Uney, Bedfordshire

Dear Inferno!

What a great comic/magazine thing! Congratulations to all your writers and artists, especially Logan Lubera and Jonathan Green. I think computer game reviews of Space Hulk and Warhammer would make your mag perfect.

I can't wait for the next issue, as I hope it's as good. By the way you should *definitely* have a letters page.

James Mould, UK

Dear Inferno!

I notice that all the stories and artwork in the last edition I read had something to do with Chaos. While I accept that this is probably the most popular race (the good against evil scenario), please could you deal with some other races as well. A comic about Squats, or the Orcs invading the Empire, would be entertaining. How about an adventure of an Elf lost in Lustria or more background on famous characters, such as Marneus Calgar, Lothar Hex or Morglum Necksnapper? It may also be possible to incorporate into the story, races and species of beings that are completely unheard of. Hey, I've just had another idea: how about a 'historical document', Top Secret, that explains the relevance of mushrooms to Snotlings and their links to brainboy past. All in all, I enjoyed the new magazine and I think it should be used to its utmost to explore possibilities and enrich the Warhammer/40K/Necromunda universe. Thank you for reading this.

Matt Benson, Western Australia

Dear Inferno!

It's nice to have lots of text rather than just comic strips. Overall *Inferno!* is great and at bi-monthly it might just satisfy my voracious reading habit. However, 'Obvious Tactics': quality of art is nice, but a b*i?%π%s story!

Mik Parkin, Sheffield

Dear Inferno!

Excellent to finally see Warhammer fiction published again for its own purpose – reading – rather than the snippets in the army books. Well done. Keep *Inferno!* going; after all, Warhammer is a big world, there is lots to write about.

David Harris, New Zealand

Dear *Inferno!*

Thank you! I have been waiting for a book devoted to adventure stories and comic strips set in the Warhammer world of ages. If I have a slight moan, it's that it is a bit short. Some punters might be expecting more than 68 pages of very interesting and exciting stories, comic strips and the like. Aside from this, *Inferno!* is excellent. Keep it up for next time!

Simon Colpus, Cleveland

Dear *Inferno!*

After badgering my local WH Smith into supplying *Inferno!*, I can only say 'well done' for a superb book. I would like to ask a few questions, if I may.

1. Will you be bringing out any stories for Epic 40K?

2. As I've been a subscriber to *White Dwarf* for the last two years will I be able to do the same with *Inferno!*?

I hope you can answer my questions and wish *Inferno!* a successful future.

Kevin Ravenhill, Redditch

Dear *Inferno!*

Well what can I say about *Inferno!*? 'More merriment than being castrated with a Snotling over some radioactive toothpaste.' I do think if you had a mixture of short and long stories it would be much stronger to read.

Also, not so many Space Marines. They are Games Workshop's trademark, but they're *boring*. I think you also need a lot more artwork. Sort it out! The almighty one has spoken.

Perry Bishop, Hants

Dear *Inferno!*

Inferno! 4 is best because it is longest!

Curtis Barton, Chelmsford, MA, USA

Dear *Inferno!*

Fantasy is my main pleasure and I still play Talisman. My mags include *White Dwarf*, *Dragon* and others. Keep up the very good work. Does my age make me your oldest fan?

Colin Lee (69), Redditch

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WRITE TO: *Inferno!*, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK
OR EMAIL: publishing@games-workshop.co.uk

DARE YOU BRAVE THE



UNLIKE MOST Games Workshop products *Inferno!* is entirely written and drawn by freelance contributors, and we are constantly on the lookout for talented writers and artists, with a good knowledge of the Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 universes. Do you fit the bill? If so, why not drop us lines.

From writers we need a one-page synopsis of your story idea and a small selection of sample writing (no hundred-thousand word epics, please). This can be either previously published work or your intended story. We want all-action, fast-paced stories, the more carnage and mayhem the better. Your idea should be for a self-contained story, a maximum of 2000 words in length, although shorter is fine.

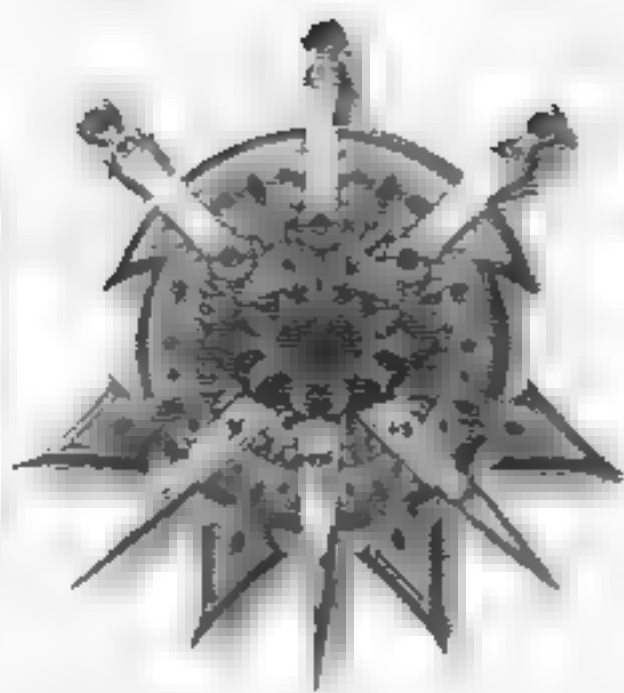
From aspiring artists we want samples of your work, and if they are Warhammer or Warhammer 40,000 samples all the better. Full-page illustrations in the style of film posters, comic strips, maps, cut-aways, technical drawings, all are fuel to the *Inferno!*

We pay competitive freelance rates for all work published. So if you think you can contribute to the raging *Inferno!* what are you waiting for? Send proposals or write and ask for our contributing guides, to this address.

Inferno!, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK



SISTERS



By

DELL RUTLEDGE

BLADES STARED DULLY at the beaker in front of her. Why was she drinking this filth? She knew only too well but pushed the thought away from her along with the empty cup.

'Another one, princess?' Licksy, attentive to a fault, called softly from behind the bar. His scarred, crumpled face pressed against the grille looked like some penned animal, huge, dark eyes filled with the sadness of resignation.

Staring at him, her own eyes tormented, dark-ringed with more than paint, she felt her heart constrict. A sob choked her throat but, knuckles white against the pitted plastic of the table edge, she fought it down. Not trusting her own voice she simply nodded. He turned, hunched over the battered flasks and she dragged herself up from her stool and over to the bar. There were no worms in, word must have got round fast, and Licksy didn't have the cage door shut, but affection for the old man and a wish to save his twisted feet got her up. As he passed her another full beaker through the slot, his thick fingers gently touched hers. His face looked even more yellow and riven than normal and his mute anxiety jerked back her memory. Ages back he had looked at her just like that as she was about to leave on some juve foray, but back then she wouldn't have been alone at the bar. She quickly sat down and took a long slug.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the movement as Sasha glanced over at her, but by the time Blades looked up the big woman's head was back down. Without war paint, Sasha's jowly face looked oddly babyish as, apparently rapt with concentration, she studied the stripped-down stubber laid out in front of her. But Blades hadn't missed the glance up. What was it? Concern, warning,

disapproval? Was she sizing her up, thinking she could take her, thinking it was time Blades's Gang needed a new leader?

She knew she shouldn't have any more Wild Snake. The Ratskin could be back at any time with news of the zombie but, sump it! She felt wretched and needed fire from somewhere. The cloying smell of the slug oil Sasha was using carried over the bar, even over the acrid stink of WildSnake. Again Blades felt her stomach contract. Why did the stupid bitch have to slip? This time she could not fight the memory away. The numbness was wearing off. The armour of habit that had seen her through the aftermath of the fight and brought her back to Licksy's place had flaked away. The jagged blade of memory slashed across her eyes, even as she screwed them tight shut against it. The vision of Katz dancing nimbly across the gantry, bullets skipping around, was seared into her eyelids. Oh, Katz had got the Orlock all right, burnt him clean in the forehead, the last one of the schlokk-baggers. Then her sister was traipsing back gleefully when she slipped.

Spire! She could still see the expression on Katz's face. Just a startled smile, not even a yell before she hit the chem sink and was gone. Why, damn it? Blades's stomach heaved again and she staggered upright. It took all of her willpower to make herself walk to the midden and she only just made it before throwing up. Her body shook as, white-knuckled, she steadied herself against the cold, corrugated iron wall.

Weakly she punched the tap, vainly trying to get enough water to clean her face and rinse away the smell and the memories. She straightened up and started as she caught sight of herself in

the grimy mirror. Spire! She looked dreadful! Her eyes stared wild from dark pits and her paint had run in purple smears where she had tried to wipe away the vomit. Get a grip! This was life, not a dream tab. Blades realised she hadn't cleaned up since she had got back. Her hair, once extravagantly plumed, now stuck in a dank, clotted mass to the side of her head, green dye mixed with blood from the last juve she'd scragged. With a sudden stab of bleak humour, she thought she would have no problem surprising the zombie – the chugger would take her for one of its own! She felt a little better at that and, smiling grimly, she set about battering the tap into supplying enough for a more thorough clean up.

Blades managed her face well enough and got painted up again, although her hand refused to stop quivering when she was applying the stick. Not an ace job, but better than before. Her hair would have to wait for the full treatment but she cleaned it as best she could and pulled it back in a tight snake, binding it with a spare plasticuff. Moving to the door, Blades took a few deep breaths and walked back into the bar.

Again she sensed quickly averted gazes but she walked calmly back over to the cage. If there was to be action it was better not to face it on an empty stomach. 'Some of your best stew and a couple of stormcrusts, Licksy,' she asked softly and smiled at the old ex-ganger.

'Coming right up, princess,' he grinned back, obviously reassured.

Of course, she could always send some of the girls to hunt down the zombie. The worms, as the citizens of Ashcliff were known, looked to Blades and her gang for protection but that didn't mean that Blades herself had to deal with every rogue slime gator or crazed mutant personally. The odd wandering zombie wasn't extraordinary. Sometimes they just stumbled vaguely about and were easily torched. Sometimes a meaner one would show and scrag a careless worm or two, but they were still no big deal. Normally, in fact, she would have sent someone else, maybe even a couple of juves eager

to notch their sluggers. Today, though, despite the sick feeling still lurking in the pit of her stomach, or perhaps even because of it, she knew she would go after the chugger herself. She flexed her fingers. They felt barely able to lift a spoon, never mind a shotgun, but maybe the action would help her get a grip on herself. Maybe? It had to.

Blades turned and looked down the bar hall. The bright, comforting light glared back off the pitted metal tables and the lurid murals. Angie and Torsh, their faces bleached spirit-pale by the light of their booth, were close as always. Their hands flickered over one of their interminable games of thornback, played, as usual, in silence save for the gentle rustle of cards and the soft scrape of counters being exchanged. Faye looked as if she was dozing at the vid desk but Blades knew better. Yooshie, she assumed, would be running the surprise box, out of sight, ready for gatecrashers, just in case. The rest of the girls were keeping out of her way. They were all behaving normally enough but, Blades wondered, was she imagining the tension in the air? The covert glances? Lips pursed with worry, or disapproval? Yes, this time she'd better go after the zombie; show she was still in control. Or some girl might just reckon she could take Blades's gang off her.

'Here y'are.' Licksy passed the stew and crusts through the hole in the security grille. Blades took them, smiled her thanks and sat back down by herself again. The stew at Licksy's was near legendary in quality and for a while Blades lost herself in enjoyment of the spicy stodge. She was assiduously mopping up the last juice with a hunk of stormcrust when Faye called, 'Ratty's back.'

Blades stuffed down the crust and quickly took the bowl back to the cage before seating herself again.

The flickering green light showed Yooshie was ready in the box. One of Faye's hands hovered over the pit flick while she pushed the door button with the other and then grabbed up her stub gun. The double pairs of security doors clanked and wheezed through their cycle

and eventually the Ratskin padded in. Angie left her game and followed him as Blades beckoned him over.

The Ratskin stood across the table from her, silent as the darkness. Like most of his kind he was short and slightly built, but Blades knew the appearance was deceptive. The Ratskin might look scrawny but he was tougher than boiled Milliasaur, with sinews like cured slime stringers and the reactions of a rubble snake. But now he just stood and stared, the blank eyes looking through her.

'Well?' the gang leader snapped. The Ratskins always quaked her a bit. There was no getting used to their silent, staring ways. She even preferred a rowdy ratty, tanked up on Second Best, to this sort of sober spook. The scout fingered some sort of amulet at his neck and for a moment his eyes seemed to focus on her.

'Found empty one,' he stated plainly, using the Ratskin word for a zombie.

'Where?' Blades was still sharp.

'In the pipes-that-echo by Joe's Crack.'

'Take me there.'

The Ratskin shrugged. 'It got foolish lone worm,' he added, unconcerned.

There was a metallic rattle as Sasha finished re-assembling her stubber. 'Want me, Chief?' she asked with a smile that Blades could not read.

'No.' The gang leader rose. 'It's only a chugging zombie. Ratty and I'll manage.'

The Ratskin shrugged again.

'I'll take your night-sight, though,' Blades said to Sasha again. 'Save me a walk to the glory hole.' The big girl thought for a moment, then nodded and passed over the visor.

'Scrag it, Chief!' Sasha encouraged and watched approvingly as with ease, almost graceful, her leader checked over her gear and lifted the faithful shotgun she'd carried ever since her first juve outings.

Then with only a soft, 'See you ladies,' Blades followed the Ratskin through the asthmatic security doors and out into the Necromundan gloom.



THE GLOW GLOBES had never been great around Ashcliff and recently they seemed to have become even dimmer. Blades shivered as she followed the silent Ratskin away from the last of the sheds and along the rough pack trail that wound through the slag dumps towards Raggy Gap. It was completely quiet. Sleep time and fear of the zombie had kept all indoors. Well, fear of the zombie and perhaps fear of her, Blades reflected. She smiled darkly – and just then heard the moaning.

It was an eerie whining, rising and falling, just audible; felt more on the neck than heard with the ears. Blades tightened her grip on the shotgun and paused. A few paces ahead the scout had stopped too. He turned, and with the skin over his head silhouetted against the sickly radiance that came from the ailing skylights it seemed as if some giant rodent had thrust its shoulders up through the clinker.

'The worm,' the Ratskin hissed.

'Why isn't he dead?' Blades demanded angrily. 'If the zombie wounded him then he should be scragged. Can't take chances with the plague! Blasted worms! You'd think living here they'd be tougher.' She thought the Ratskin shrugged but couldn't be sure in the gloom. He had turned again and was making off down the side track that led to Joe's Place.



JOE WAS LONG DEAD but the ash-brick and rubble hovels that he had built were still there, inhabited now by the extended family of his grandson. As they crested a low ash ridge Blades could see a few lights glowing ahead. The crack that Joe had given his name to and had made his livelihood from was still there too. It was a jagged scar between fifteen and thirty feet deep, narrow, sheer-sided and twisting through the ash for almost half a mile. Joe had discovered that various hapless creatures – snakes, rats, ashworms, and so on – would often fall in

it and be unable to get out. With care and the aid of a rope hoist, he made a good living out of the unfortunates. Well, until he was scragged by a huge slime gator that had fallen in while wandering from pool to pool. Jake, his son, climbed down and got the gator; he made so much money from it that it went to his head and he'd run off further down-hive with one of the duster girls from Peeky's Palace. Hanko, Jake's abandoned wife, was a tough old tunnel chicken and she and the kids had kept the place going. Jakey, the eldest, pretty much handled things now. He was all right, Blades recalled. None too sharp but he kept out of trouble and paid his dues.

Almost bumping into the Ratskin's back jerked her out of her reverie. Careless, she bitterly admonished herself. Blades girl, what is wrong with you? she continued her mental self-castigation. But she knew what was wrong and again had to fight back unpleasant thoughts. The Ratskin was saying something.

'Tracked from here. Not big. Staggering.' He was whispering. Just ahead, Blades could see the overturned hopper of the bagger, its noxious cargo split across the path. Something was skittering among the rubble behind the hopper. The scout muttered a salutation in his own tongue and, fastidiously stepping around the spilled garbage, headed on up the path.

They soon reached the steading and were waved into a small rubble shed where a disturbing sight met their eyes. Lying on a trestle table was the injured bagger. He was still moaning but only quietly now, and he seemed only semi-conscious. The unfortunate victim had been stripped to the waist and Blades could see a long wound running down from his head, across his shoulder and over his ribs. His right ear and part of his cheek had been sliced away and the white of bone showed through the gash in several places. The table was slick with his blood and it had pooled beneath it too, but the worst of the bleeding had been stopped. Presumably this was thanks to the woman bending over the prostrate man and attending to the wound.

'Spire!' Blades swore, recognising the distinctive, bitter smell of stinger mould paste even over the sooty stench of the slug oil lamps. 'What are you doing?' the gang leader snapped at the woman. 'He should have been scragged and torched. You know the law!'

The woman did not look up but replied in a quiet voice. 'It's just a cut. The zombie only slashed him. The wound's clean and there are no bite marks.'

Jakey, the big prospector who had waved them in, whispered from behind Blades, 'It's Uncle Zot, Ma's brother.'

Blades swallowed, 'You know the rules, Hanko. He's been got by a dead one, a zombie. The plague's too much of a risk. He's got to go.'

The woman turned. She had a slight, pinched face. It had been beautiful once but time and the Hive had taken its toll. The once-delicate features were now harsh and lined. Grey hair flopped listlessly from under a grubby red scarf. 'We can watch him.' Her voice was clipped into a challenge.

'Ma...' Jakey's voice tailed off.

'The rules are to protect all of us, Hanko,' Blades said firmly, gripping her shotgun. 'I can't allow this. What in Spire's name possessed him to be out with the zombie about anyway?'

'Four hungry girls.' Hanko's voice was bitter.

There was silence for a moment. One of the lamps spluttered and the distorted shadows flickered on the rubble wall. 'You'd better leave, Hanko,' Blades spoke softly now but still firmly.

'I'm not going,' the older woman turned and started dabbing at the wound again.

'Ma...' Jakey mumbled once more, then shuffled outside.

'You too, out!' Blades waved her gun at the Ratskin. He shrugged, his perennial gesture, and left.

'Hanko—' the younger woman began.

'I'm not leaving.'

Blades moved around the table opposite Hanko, who was now deftly stitching the widest gash.

The bagger lay quiet, now quite

unconscious. Blades bent over him. The lamp smoke and the stinger mould brought back an echo of her former nausea. Even so, her stiletto had pierced the man's heart and had been withdrawn before Hanko even noticed. The bagger gave one twitch and his sister looked over at the gang leader in silence.

Her face was blank and her voice flat as she asked, 'What about the youngsters?'

'We'll take any fit girl juves.' Blades voice was strained. 'If you can't take the others, Peeky probably will. It sucks as an arrangement, but better than starving.' The ganger turned and went out, wiped the stiletto on a patch of basket fungus and sheathed it. 'C'mon, Ratty,' she instructed, 'let's get the chugger.'

Jakey stared after them. They could hear his shaking voice. 'Ma...'



PIPES THIS WAY,' hissed the Ratskin. Blades knew without having to be told. The pipes had been considered a good play area. Close enough to hab zone so that it was unlikely that you would find anything really nasty holed up there but often housing snakes, rats and spiders. A good place for a sub-juve to cut her teeth. Then she and her sister, Katz, had often explored the pipes, after letting Joe know they were there. Blades's memory flashed to the feeling of pride when they had sold their first four-footer to Hairy Mary. How the old hag had given each of them four shots of Second Best, 'One for each foot, my dears,' in a bottle of algae juice and they'd been ill all night. They were there... They had sold... They'd been ill...

The sob caught her unawares and escaped before she could choke it back. The Ratskin turned.

'Just ash in the throat,' Blades mumbled and quickly pulled the visor over her eyes. Detail sharpened immediately. No wonder she preferred not to wear the chugging things.

BLADES WAS GLAD to have to concentrate on her footing as she climbed the treacherous slag slope up to where the pipe holes stared out, two black pits. She had a fleeting image of Hanko's eyes but quickly turned her thoughts to trying to remember the pipe layout. No one knew what the pipes originally were. Nearly a mile of man-sized tubes running in and out of each other. The pipes echoed alarmingly and to the uninitiated seemed a maze. The appearance was deceptive, though, and they actually followed a fairly regular grid pattern. Even now, years after, Blades could remember it. There had been five entrances. Three had been down the other side of the hill, near the pack trail. They had been buried in the avalanche which renegades had triggered during a daring ambush of a guilder caravan a couple of strokes back. Now there were only two holes and they connected pretty soon.

The climb had been a steep one and the ganger was panting slightly as she gave her orders to the scout. 'You take this pipe, Ratty. After a bit there's a junction. The left fork only runs about ten paces and then stops but check it. Then go right. After a while it runs into the other tube. I'll meet you at the entrance and we can clear the rest together.' The Ratskin shrugged, half-cocked his musket, and disappeared into the pipe. Blades had no doubt he could handle the zombie if he met it. She laughed mirthlessly as she reflected that, in fact, he could probably sense better and move far more quietly than she could.

She toiled on up and to the right where the other pipe opened. She felt better now. The adrenaline was beginning to flow. Blades felt her lips tighten and the familiar prickle of thrill in the pit of her stomach. She checked the magazine of the shotgun again, man-stopper and incendiary mix. The chugger was going to pay for having picked her patch. She adjusted the fit of the borrowed night-sight visor and stepped cautiously into the pipe.

Using all her skill, the ganger moved stealthily into the hill. There was a fresh

looking patch of gunk on the pipe, just inside the entrance. Could be the zombie, she mused. Could be just about anything.

Not far into the hill, thought she heard a noise. Blades pulled up, raising the shotgun. Creeping slowly forward towards a twist in the passage she became positive. Something was around the corner. Could it be the zombie already? Shotgun cocked and moving with extreme caution lest she start the pipes reverberating, Blades crept around the corner.

A short way up the pipe, a large rat was nosing at something. Alone, it would probably be no problem. Blades stepped out. The rat froze, then turned and sniffed towards her. She took a step forward. The rat skittered off into the gloom at the edge of her visor's range. Still very cautious, Blades moved on. There was another splash of gunk on the pipe. It must have been what the rat was investigating. Blades stooped over it. In the eerie green universe of her passive visor it was hard to tell anything about such goo; it was just that, a splash of gunk. She daredn't poke at it and so, straightening, she moved on.

Blades was amazed at how the old habits came back: The strange shuffle that kept one to the bottom of the pipe and avoided the echoes. The careful sweeping ahead of the shotgun to check for webs that were almost impossible to see even with the visor. There were other memories of those juve days too but she pushed them firmly out of her mind. She must be near the intersection now.

'These pipes clear.' The sudden hiss caught her completely off-guard. It was the Ratskin warning her in advance before she stumbled into him. Stepping closer she could just make out his watery, green form in the blank hole that was the mouth of the connecting pipe. Right at the limit of the visor's range. How in spire's name had he detected her? Blades again reflected how the Ratskins quaked her. How did he see anything in here? They were spooks all right, but you had to be impressed.

The ganger controlled her voice carefully. 'Clear down here too. Follow

me.' She was tempted to send the Ratskin in front but it smacked of weakness. And she was not weak, she wasn't. She was the leader, it was her gang, damn them! She couldn't help feeling a prickle of unease with him behind, though. Blades couldn't even hear a rustle from him, yet every slight noise she made roared in her ears. She had to fight the impulse to look round and check he was actually there.

Perhaps it was this preoccupation that made her miss the web and only the discipline of years stopped her crying out as it slapped into her face. She stopped and checked carefully. No spiders. It must just have been a remnant. She shuddered slightly as she pulled the thick, sticky threads from her skin and hair. She had just cleared the last one when she thought she heard a noise. A light tap on her shoulder made her start but showed the Ratskin had heard it too.

It came again, a lispig, sucking, breathy noise half way between a whisper and a gurgle. Her heart pumped harder. Odd, zombies were normally quiet. Very slowly, shotgun at the ready, Blades shuffled forward. The noise was coming from a pipe intersection further up on the right. Tightening her grip on the shotgun, Blades slid round the corner.

There was a clatter as the shotgun fell and the echoes rebounded along the pipe. Blades stood frozen, jaw slack and speechless, her hands held feebly out in front of her. Only when the figure in the pipe began limping towards her, stiletto raised in its one good hand, did the scream burst from Blade's throat, rising from her belly, rising from the past, drowning her as she slumped against the pipe wall. She was only dimly conscious of the flash and thunderous crash of a musket firing.



WHEN BLADES CAME TO, she tried to scream again but all that came out was a groan. Not a zombie at all!

The full horror swamped her. She knocked the visor aside and pressed her fists into her eyes trying to blot out the image of the ruined face that was burnt into her brain. The relentless, undying image of that chem-burned wreck dragging itself towards her. No recognition in its blank eyes, only mindless death.

Spire knew what agonies the chem sink must have inflicted to turn her into that wandering killer. Was she dimly still fighting that last gang fight? Was she in some insane hell dimly trying to battle her way home? Had some twisted memories from childhood drawn her back to those pipes?

Flushed, chest heaving, the ganger fought to stop the shaking that convulsed her. Gradually she controlled herself and lowered her hands, opened her eyes.

The Ratskin was sitting opposite her, re-priming his musket, face a blank, unreadable mask.

'You killed her?' Blades asked weakly.

'It dead,' the scout replied.

'Let's get out,' Blades panted, struggling to her feet and straining to lift the shotgun. The Ratskin started off and she followed shakily, the visor making the world dreamlike once more

The effort of walking concentrated her thoughts. Blades's mind raced and her body physically reeled as she thought about what the scout had witnessed, and not just here in the pipes. He'd been there when she'd scragged the garbage-bagger! Because of the risk of plague. Spire! Spire! Chugging Spire!

Her brain was racing; before she was aware of it she stumbled. The scout turned. Through the visor his eyes were just black pits. Like Hanko's! Seeming to her to accuse and condemn in a look... Spire! This would not do!

'Right, girl?' the Ratskin asked softly.

'Oh yes, Ratty! I'm all right,' the ganger replied, and there was steel in her voice.

The scout turned without another word and continued up the pipe. Smoothly Blades raised her shotgun and put a man-stopper into the back of his head. He went down like a scragged zombie.

She leaned against the pipe wall until the echoes had subsided. 'Not much chugging use, your lucky amulet!' she muttered viciously at the lifeless body. Then the ganger forced herself to turn back and head down the pipe again.

She only threw up once before she'd pumped three incendiaries into the already half-charred body, barely daring to look where she was aiming, not daring to miss and let it lie around for anyone to find. In the ghastly glow and stench of the flames, she made her way back to the dead Ratskin.

'Thanks, Ratty,' the ganger spat as she fired more incendiaries into the scout's body.



EVENTUALLY BLADES dragged herself to the pipe entrance. Bright through the visor she could see a figure at the bottom of the hill: Jakey. The gang leader forced herself stiffly upright and made herself walk calmly down to where he was waiting.

'Get it?' the prospector asked nervously, fingering his own shotgun.

Blades did not raise the visor. 'Yeah,' she replied, her voice hollow. 'It scragged the Ratskin, but I got it.'

Jakey shuffled. 'Ma said to say thanks,' he mumbled, unused, perhaps, to talking so much. 'Says she's sorry she was weak. Knows you can't take any chances with that zombie plague.'

Blades stumbled slightly and sat down hard on a flat rock.

'You all right?' Jakey said with obvious concern.

'Yeah... fine, fine. Go back to Licksy's and tell Sasha to bring some meltas and kraks. I'm sealing those pipes for good.'

Jakey headed off into the glow globe twilight without a word, and the tears started.

'Oh, Katz,' she sobbed. 'Oh my sister!' ●

BRAUL

Script - Dan Abnett
Art - Karl Kopinski
Letters - David Pugh

SO THAT NIGHT IN THE TEN-TAILED CAT, IN THE BACK STREETS OF TALABEC, IT WAS BUSINESS AS USUAL.

THE DRINKING WAS AS HEARTY, THE OATHING AS VULGAR AND THE ALE AS WATERED AS EVER.



ZERN SLITBELT'S IN A BOOTH AT THE BACK, TALKING PRICES WITH JUDDER THE FENCE.

NEXT THING, THEIR PEACEFUL TETE-A-TETE IS SHATTERED BY OXTONGUE VOLT.



WHISPER IS, ZERN GOT SOME SHINIES TO SHIFT, AND FAST.



SOMEONE'S JUST TOLD OXTONGUE THAT ZERN HAS BEEN PLAYING LORDS AND WENCHES WITH HIS SISTER ZELDA.

I CAN'T IMAGINE WHO.

THAT'S WHEN THE FIGHT STARTS.



ZERN BREAKS HIS LEFT HAND...

...AND THEN
A RAFTER.

KRAKKK!!

AND IN THE CONFUSION,
ZERN'S SHINIES GO
WALKABOUT.



BY DINT OF WHERE HE LANDS, ZERN
IS INSTRUMENTAL IN GETTING THE FOUR
OFF-DUTY MERCENARIES FROM ARNULF
SCHWARZ'S NOTORIOUS BAND INVOLVED.



THEN EVERYTHING GETS RATHER EXCITED.



ABELARD VRIES STAYS
WELL OUT OF THE WAY
AT A BACK TABLE.



HE'S JUST ENJOYING
A '43 PINOT DRAK.

SMASSSHHH!



HE ISN'T QUITE READY
FOR THE SECOND BOTTLE.



OXTONGUE DECIDES TO
FIND OUT HOW MANY
TEETH THE TROOPERS
HAVE GOT BETWEEN THEM.

BY REMOVING THEM
AND COUNTING THEM
OUT INTO PILES.

ONE OF THE TROOPERS
BREAKS A STOOL OVER
OXTONGUE'S NOGGIN.



IN ABOUT A WEEK, HE'LL
REMEMBER TO SAY 'OW'.

JUDDER THE FENCE DOES
HIS EMPIRE-FAMOUS
WORM IMPRESSION...

... AND HEADS
FOR THE EXIT.



LO AND BEHOLD, HE
RUNS ACROSS ZERN'S
SHINIES, BOLD AS YOU
LIKE, WHERE THEY FELL.



"MUST BE MY
LUCKY NIGHT,"
HE MUTTERS.

IT ISN'T.



THIS IS WHERE I COME IN.

IT TAKES A LOT OF LIP
AND A LOT OF GUILT TO
START UP A TAVERN
BRAWL ON CUE.

A BRAWL TO
COVER YOUR
OWN BUSINESS
TRANSACTIONS.



BY THE TIME THE MILITIA HAVE
DRAGGED EVERYONE OUT, NO
ONE WILL BE ANY THE WISER
AS TO WHAT REALLY STARTED IT.



OR WHAT THE PERSON
WHO STARTED IT WAS
AFTER.



A GOOD NIGHT'S WORK,
IF I SAY SO MYSELF.



I'M JUST THINKING
WHAT I'LL SPEND
THE PROCEEDS ON
WHEN I TURN INTO
DARKDOG LANE...



...AND FIND OUT WHO ZERN
GOT THE SHINIES FROM IN
THE FIRST PLACE. AND WHY
HE WANTED SHOT OF
THEM SO FAST.



GIVE US
BACK OUR
TALISMAN...

SOMETIMES YOU PLAY
ALL SIDES OFF AGAINST
THE MIDDLE...

...AND FIND OUT THAT'S
EXACTLY WHERE
YOU'RE STANDING.

AAHHHEEEEE!

END

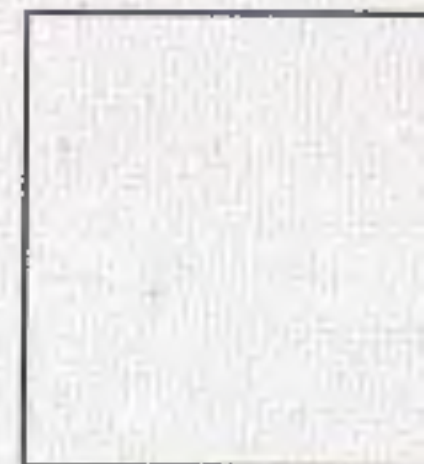






Yolanda, by Karl Kopinski

Outlands Annie is the leader of an outlaw gang of female cut-throats and mercenaries known as the Wildcats. However, a certain Necromundan Bounty Hunter, Kal Jerico, uncovered her dark secret – that she is, in fact, Yolanda Catallus, missing daughter of Spyre noble Lord Catallus.



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Tyrannid, by Rob Walker

The Tyranids are an extra-galactic race of super-predators. Each and every creature is linked in psychic communion by the all-encompassing hive mind. With this great psychic ability and with the terrifying ferocity of their myriad, alien bio-constructs, they mean to consume the entire galaxy.



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The Affair of the Araby Exhibit. by Gordon Rennie

Zavant Konniger, gentleman sage, and the Chief-Archivist locked eyes across the room. Vido remembered the stories about these two old intellectual adversaries, how the Chief-Archivist had once attempted to have Konniger burned at the stake on charges of heresy against the faith of Sigmar. 'I am to believe that two guards have been found slain,' Konniger said, 'that it is suspected but as yet unconfirmed that items may have been stolen and that Brother Wollen, a novice-scribe here in the Archives, is missing and believed to be the culprit. Now, in any murder, I've always found it best to deal with the cadavers first...'

In the Belly of the Beast. by Bill King

Shipmaster Hauptman gestured to the bolo-pit with one long, perfectly manicured finger. Control runes flickered emerald on the lectern, underlighting his face and giving it a hollow, almost daemonic look. 'Give me the benefit of your wisdom, Brother-Sergeant Hakon – what do you make of that?' An object appeared in the pit; it was greyish and round, and looked like a small asteroid. Hauptman gestured again. The plainsong of the tech-priests swelled; the air blurred, lights flickered and the object expanded then came into better resolution.

'Extremely unusual. Are those doorways in the thing's side? Is it a base of some sort?' The Space Wolf was clearly puzzled.

Hauptman stroked his beard, cocked his head to one side. 'Far from it, Sergeant. Astropath Chandara assures me that it is alive!'

Sisters. by Neil Rutledge

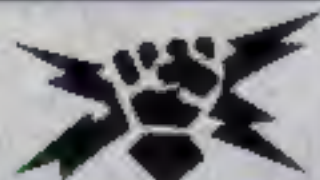
Blades knew she shouldn't have any more Wild Snake. The Ratskin could be back at any time with news of the zombie but, sump it! She felt wretched and needed fire from somewhere. *Why did the stupid bitch have to slip?* This time she could not fight the memory away. The vision of Katz dancing nimbly across the gantry, bullets skipping around, was seared into her eyelids. Oh, Katz had got the Orlock all right, burnt him clean in the forehead. Then her sister was traipsing back gleefully when she slipped. Spire! She could still see the expression on Katz's face. Just a startled smile, not even a yell before she hit the chem sink and was gone. *Why, damn it, why?*

Also featuring...

Brawl, just another quiet night in the Ten-Tailed Cat related in a comic strip by Dan Abnett and Karl Kopinski; *Deff Skwadron*, the Orks fight back, from Karl Kopinski; more heart-pumping mayhem in *Obvious Tactics* from David Pugh; and storming artwork from Ralph Horsley and Jeff Wayne!

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United Kingdom
Games Workshop Ltd,
Willow Road,
Lenton,
Nottingham
NG7 2WS

Australia
Games Workshop Ltd,
23 Liverpool Street,
Ingleburn
NSW 2565

USA
Games Workshop Inc,
6721 Baymeadow Drive,
Glen Burnie, Maryland
21060-6401

Canada
Games Workshop Ltd,
1645 Bonhill Road,
Units 9-11,
Mississauga,
Ontario
L5T 1R3



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